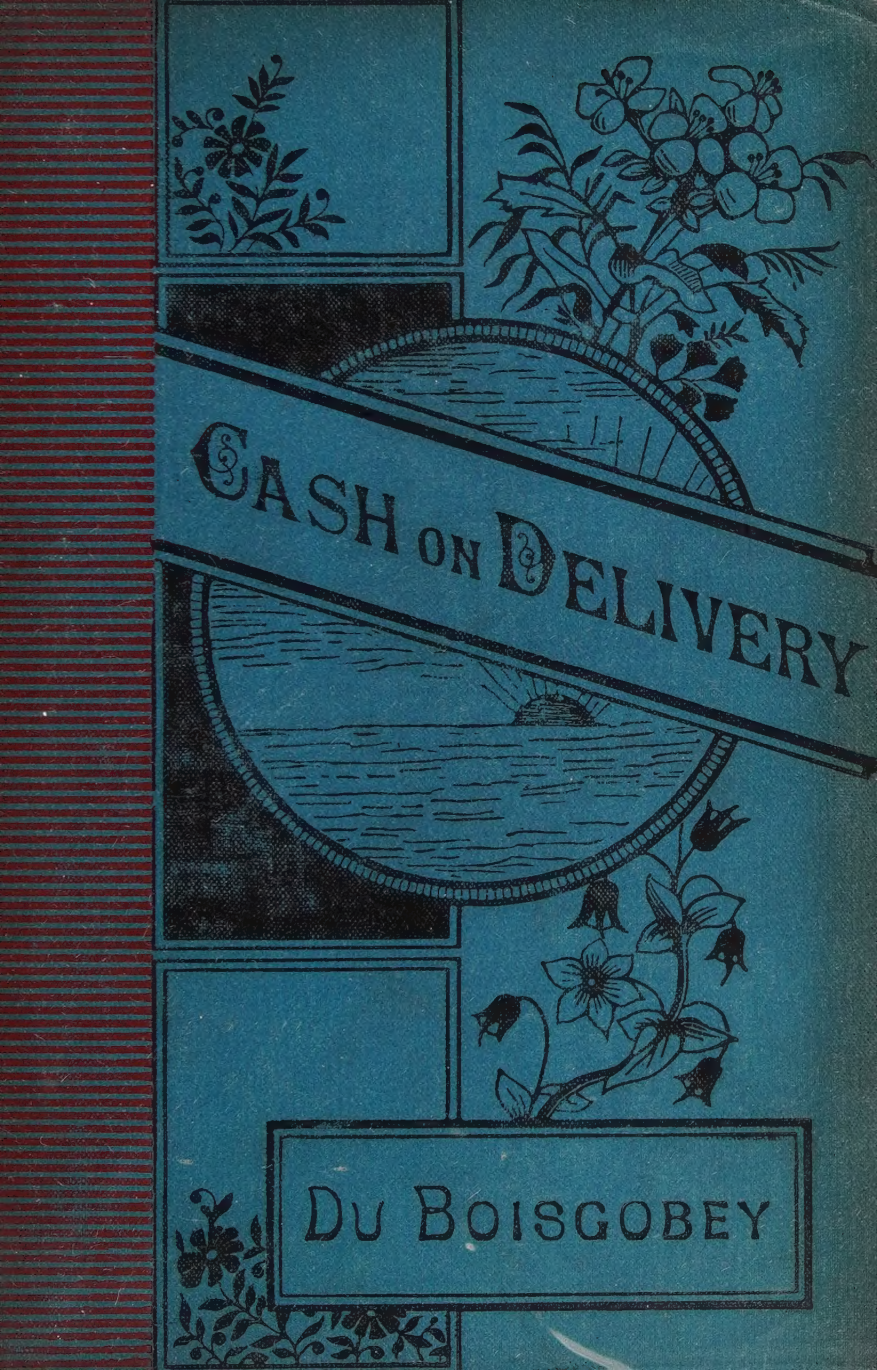
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DU BOISGOBEY

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2 vols

CASH ON DELIVERY

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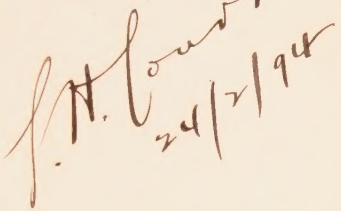

BY

FORTUNÉ DU BOISGOBEY

IN TWO VOLUMES—VOL. I.

AUTHORISED COPYRIGHT TRANSLATION

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CASH ON DELIVERY.

CHAPTER I.

It was a cold, stormy winter's night. The wind was blowing a gale and the rain and sleet cut and stung the faces of the unfortunate pedestrians who were laboriously making their way up the broad Boulevard Montmartre, like a thousand tiny whip-cords. As a natural consequence they endeavored to shield their faces with their umbrellas, and this being the case, collisions were of frequent occurrence.

"Take care, you nearly knocked me down!" exclaimed one victim.

"Confound you! you've ruined a hat for me, and a brand-new one at that."

After this interchange of amenities, the two men lifted their umbrellas high above their heads, and looked at each other.

"What! is it you?" they both exclaimed, in the same breath.

They were both young, but they did not resemble each other in the least.

One was tall, slender, dark-complexioned and remarkably handsome. The other had broad shoulders, a slight tendency to embonpoint, chestnut hair, a full beard of the same color, and a face, not ugly, but insignificant, which is a thousand times worse.

Though he was the elder of the two men he certainly could not have been more than twenty-five years of age.

"What a piece of good luck!" exclaimed the dark-complexioned youth. "Do you know, my dear Gustave, that we have not met since we were comrades in the 24th Dragoons at Dinàn?"

"That was in '79, my friend, more than six years ago, and I am delighted to see you again. What are you doing now, and how does life serve you?"

"Tolerably well, my dear fellow. I am acting as Labitte's private secretary, now."

"Labitte, the banker on the Rue d'Enghien? A good house that."

"Excellent, and I am very nicely fixed there. My father was an intimate friend of my employer, who treats me like a spoiled child."

"You get about three hundred francs a month, probably?"

"Five hundred; and I hope to soon have an interest in the business. And you, Gustave, how are you getting on?"

"Oh, I've no particular cause to complain; I've been speculating a little of late, and with very fair success."

"You have some capital, then?"

"Yes. You wonder at it, of course; as I was not rolling in wealth by any means when we were both members of the same regiment. The truth is, I was not born a millionaire. My mother had to strain every nerve to raise the necessary amount to save me from the three years of obligatory military service; and the poor woman died, leaving me nothing but debts to pay. She was a widow, so my prospects were by no means brilliant, but I've managed to get along all the same."

"I congratulate you. I should certainly have had a hard time of it if I had been in your place. How did you manage it?"

"Oh, I have a natural talent for speculation, I think. Besides, in Paris, a little shrewdness is all one needs to

start one on the road to fortune, and though I am not rich yet, I shall be sooner or later, and in the meantime, I am living very comfortably. I have been very lucky, it is true, inasmuch as a large capitalist has taken a fancy to me, and given me an interest in his operations, and as I am generally fortunate, I have made a good deal of money already. If you have any capital to invest you had better apply to me. I will see that it is put where it will yield you handsome returns."

"I have none, unfortunately."

"I thought your parents were very rich."

"They had four or five hundred thousand francs worth of real estate in the department of Ille et Vilaine, and that was all my father left at his death. My mother, who resides in Rennes, has half the income, and I get along very nicely on the other half and my salary."

"A total of above twelve thousand francs per annum, as the English say. That is not an enormous sum, but one can live very comfortably on it; besides, you are just the fellow to make a wealthy marriage. You are contemplating one now, I am sure."

"You are very much mistaken. I am only an insignificant clerk. No heiress would look at me."

"You are too modest. You have a name, to say nothing of your personal attractions. Robert de Becherel—that sounds well—and I know plenty of rich young girls who would be proud to bear it. Under the Republic rank is an even more desirable possession than in times past. You are a prize in the matrimonial market, while I, Gustave Piton, shall not be considered an eligible *parti* until I become the possessor of a couple of millions at least."

"I hope that happy day will soon dawn, my friend. I, myself, am less ambitious. I shall be perfectly satisfied to marry some well-bred and pretty girl, with a fortune about equal to my own."

"In that case, I know the very person you are looking

for. She has five hundred thousand francs in cash, and expectations; twenty-four years old, and an orphan; very handsome, very intelligent and very well-bred. Has a childless uncle who is wealthy, apoplectic, and a sexagenarian. She has been from childhood under the care of a highly respectable lady—a countess, by the way, who is very anxious to marry her ward to a nobleman. I'll introduce you to her whenever you like."

"Oh, I'm in no hurry about it."

"But you do not absolutely refuse, and I feel sure that you will thank me for introducing you into one of the pleasantest and most popular houses in Paris. I am on my way there now, and I'll take you with me."

"This evening? What can you be thinking of? I am not in evening dress; besides, I'm covered with mud."

"So am I, for that matter, but we can have our boots blacked a few steps from here, and then take a carriage. It is not one of my lady's grand reception days, so you will be graciously received, even in a frock coat."

"But under what pretext will you take me there, simpleton?"

"I am a friend of the family, and have full permission to bring any old comrade I please. I can insure you a hearty welcome and a very pleasant time, and you needn't feel under the slightest obligation to pay court to Mademoiselle Herminia des Andrieux, the heiress in question, unless you choose."

"Her name is Herminia, then?" exclaimed Robert, bursting into a hearty laugh.

"Alas! yes. It is her only fault, however. But I repeat that you will be perfectly free to do as you please. Once introduced to the countess, you can either listen to some very excellent music, take a seat at the card-table, or have a chat with some very agreeable ladies—just as the mood seizes you."

"So they play there?"

"Oh, yes: whist, écarté and other innocent games. Don't fancy I'm trying to inveigle you into a gambling-den, though, if I remember rightly, you were not afraid of a little baccarat in days gone by. At Madame de Malvoisine's they play only for amusement, however, and the evening usually ends with a dance, followed by a nice little supper."

"Yet you say this is not her regular reception night. What do they do there on gala occasions?"

"Nothing more. To tell you the truth, there is always a good time going on at the house of this kind-hearted countess, and when you've once had a taste of it, I predict that you'll cry for more. The programme for to-night is rather attractive, you must admit."

"Yes, if it were not for that introduction with a view to matrimony."

"Oh, set your mind at rest upon that score. The fair Herminia doesn't want for suitors, and will not see a possible one in you. You'll have a chance to see her, and the sight will cost you nothing. Come, let us step into the bootblack's."

Robert still retained a very pleasant recollection of his former acquaintance with this good-natured friend, and was by no means loath to renew it. Besides, Robert dearly loved surprises, and the idea of spending the evening at the house of this countess whom he had never seen, seemed both original and amusing to him. He said to himself that it might be necessary for him to be a little on his guard, in this unknown world into which his friend was about to take him, but he felt sure of not compromising himself, though he had a weakness for card-playing. This weakness his father had transmitted to him with his blood, for this father had lost at least half of his fortune at the card-table; but Robert, protected by the very smallness of his income, had succeeded in curing himself of this hereditary fault; at least he thought so. He therefore decided,

though not without some hesitation, to accept the invitation of this agreeable friend, and when the operation of restoring the polish their boots had lost on the muddy boulevard was concluded, they both entered a carriage they were fortunate enough to find on the corner of the Rue Vivienne.

But had Robert known what was in store for him, he certainly would never have set foot in that vehicle.

"Where does your friend the countess live?" he inquired.

"At the upper end of the Rue du Rocher. It is quite a distance, but it is only nine o'clock, so we shall get there in very good season. You will have an opportunity to hear Mademoiselle Violette, who sings divinely."

"And who is Mademoiselle Violette?"

"Mademoiselle Herminia's music teacher, and a very pretty girl she is, upon my word! But she hasn't a penny unfortunately, so I advise you not to turn your eyes in that direction. But what nonsense! You have a sweetheart, of course. I am almost sure you were going to see her when I met you."

"You are very much mistaken, my dear fellow. I have no sweetheart, and when we ran into each other a few minutes ago, I was just returning from the Rue de l'Arcade, where my employer had sent me to deliver ten thousand francs to a client I did not find at home, unfortunately."

"So you still have the ten thousand francs in your possession?" inquired Gustave.

"Certainly," replied Robert, "and as the banking-house on the Rue d'Enghien is now closed, I shall not be able to return the money to the cashier until morning. But why do you ask the question?"

"Why, because they play cards at the house of the countess, as I said before," replied Gustave, "and if you should allow yourself to yield to temptation—"

"What do you take me for? This is not the first time I have carried large sums of money that did not belong to me, and I assure you that I have never felt the slightest inclination to touch them."

"Oh, I don't doubt your honesty in the least, only 'the man who has drunk, will drink,' the proverb says. You used to be very fond of cards; you must still be fond of them, and you always will be fond of them, so perhaps the opportunity only is lacking. I wanted to warn you of the danger, that is all. Still, even if you should lose the ten thousand francs, you would be able to refund the money. Real estate was made to be mortgaged, you know. Yours is still free from incumbrance, I suppose?"

"Yes, and I hope it always will be."

The conversation ceased here, and about fifteen minutes afterward the carriage drew up in front of an iron gateway on the Rue du Rocher.

"Here we are," remarked Gustave, opening the carriage door. "It is still raining. I have a great mind to keep the carriage."

"As you please."

"Then I will do so, provided you allow me to pay the coachman when he takes us home. You are my guest, and it is only fair that I should defray the expenses of the evening's entertainment."

And leaping from the carriage, Gustave gave an order to the coachman before ringing the bell.

Robert alighted in his turn, and saw that the house was eminently respectable in appearance, though not large. Every window from basement to garret was brilliantly lighted; three handsome private coupés were standing before the door, and in the court-yard stood a servant in livery, armed with an umbrella, which he held over each newcomer.

The friends divested themselves of their overcoats in a hall that strongly resembled a conservatory, so lavishly was it adorned with rare exotics, and were then ushered into a

drawing-room where they found about twenty persons assembled.

The majority of the guests were men, but there were several ladies, at least three of whom were young. The others were of an uncertain age, but still had some pretensions to good looks. In the center of the largest feminine group the Countess de Malvoisine sat enthroned—an imposing matron, with a very low-necked dress, and blazing with diamonds.

When Robert de Becherel, escorted by his friend, advanced to pay his respects to her, a low murmur of admiration rose from the ladies, who unanimously declared him charming.

Gustave presented him to the countess, who received him very graciously, and when Robert apologized for not being in evening dress, she said suavely:

"With a name like yours, one doesn't need to be in full dress to be welcome anywhere. I am delighted to see you, and very grateful to our friend Gustave for bringing you here."

Robert bowed his thanks for the compliment, but had considerable difficulty in repressing a strong desire to laugh.

The countess seemed a rather grotesque person to him: and he already began to feel strong doubts of the authenticity of the title she bore.

"From this moment my house is open to you," she continued graciously, "and I hope to see you here often. Now make yourself perfectly at home. Gustave will pilot you through my salon, where you will find that every one does exactly as he pleases."

"We will begin by paying our respects to Mademoiselle Herminia," exclaimed Gustave, pushing Robert toward the piano, by which three young ladies were standing, talking, only a few steps from a table where two gentlemen were playing écarté, surrounded by several other guests.

The center of this little group, which any lover of the classics would undoubtedly have compared to the Three

Graces, the handsome Herminia instantly attracted attention by reason of her almost masculine stature.

One could see her from afar off, and there could be no doubt that she was the heiress Gustave had described. There was something in her very bearing that proclaimed the richly dowered maiden who looks down superciliously upon other young people from the height of her grandeur. She seemed to say, "Adore me. I shall be worth a million some day."

She was really very handsome, and would have been a great belle under the Directory unquestionably. The happy possessor of rather coarse but regular features, large black eyes, superb shoulders, and a majestic figure, she would have been adorable dressed as Mme. Tallien dressed in Barras's time; but the costume of the present day that suits *svelte* forms so well was less becoming to her, as it revealed her rather massive proportions too plainly. In short, Herminia lacked both grace and distinction; but to compensate for this she possessed a complexion of wonderful freshness, and dazzling white teeth that she displayed freely on all occasions.

Robert was neither charmed nor intimidated when presented to her by his friend. He confined himself to bowing politely, leaving to the obliging Gustave the task of sounding the praises of his friend M. de Becherel, a gentleman of ancient lineage.

The aristocracy were evidently held in high esteem in Mme. de Malvoisine's drawing-room, and seemed to be the subject of frequent discussion there, for Mlle. Herminia remarked graciously:

"The name of Becherel is one of the oldest in Burgundy."

"I do not know whether there are any Becherels in Burgundy or not," replied Robert, smiling, "but I am sure that my family does not belong in that province."

"You are from Brittany, are you not, sir?" asked one

of the other young ladies—a dark-eyed blonde, with a very sweet voice.

"Yes, mademoiselle. Can it be that you are a compatriot of mine?"

"No, monsieur; but when I was a child I spent several years at the Convent of the Visitation in Rennes, and I remember the name very well. It was borne by a lady who was justly considered one of the kindest and most generous friends of the sisterhood."

"It must have been my mother, mademoiselle. She and I are the last of the Becherels."

"These reminiscences are very interesting," said Herminia, dryly; "but I am sure that these gentlemen would like to hear you play, my dear Violette, so do me the favor to seat yourself at the piano."

Violette's eyes drooped, and she obeyed without a word. The poor girl was not there for her own pleasure. The countess paid her to play, so play she must; but she certainly had a right to think that her ungrateful pupil was punishing her too severely for having ventured to take part in the conversation for an instant.

Robert, incensed by this display of arrogance on the part of the heiress, was strongly tempted to make a stinging retort. He was also seized with a profound compassion for the unfortunate musician who was subjected to the humiliation of being treated as a servant by the necessity of earning her own livelihood.

Gustave gave him a warning glance; and just as he did so Mme. de Malvoisine called her young charge, who bowed coldly to the gentlemen and walked away, evidently much displeased, to rejoin the countess.

The third young lady—an insignificant blonde—followed Herminia, and the two friends were left standing alone near the piano.

"Well, what do you think of the majestic Herminia?" asked Gustave. "Confess that she is magnificent."

"One couldn't find a finer Goddess of Liberty. She reminds me of the statue of Marseilles on the Place de la Concorde."

"You are certainly hard to please. I admit that she hasn't a wasp-like waist; but I, for my part, greatly prefer her to that puny-looking governess who seems to have taken your fancy."

"Each one to his taste, my dear fellow."

"That is true; and as I did not come here to flirt with the young ladies, I am going to try my luck at écarté awhile. There is plenty of money to be won here; and I shouldn't be sorry if my evening yielded me a hundred louis or so."

"I wish you good luck, I am sure."

"That is to say you intend to take yourself off after the English fashion, without saying anything to anybody. Just as you please. I brought you here because I thought you would enjoy yourself; but you are not obliged to remain if you are beginning to find it tiresome. I advise you to wait awhile, however. In the first place, you will have an opportunity to hear your favorite, Mademoiselle Violette, who has remarkable musical talent: and in the second place, the rooms are just beginning to fill up. There is a crowd of new-comers now and several ladies, you see. Possibly you will find some one more to your taste. But in any case, I hope we shall see each other again. Where do you live?"

"No. 29 Faubourg Poissonnière. And you?"

"No. 24 Rue Drouot. I am not often at home; but you need only drop me a line to find me at any time. We will dine together any day you name."

Having said this, Gustave walked to the card-table, and Robert approached Mlle. Violette, who was looking over the music portfolios in search of the piece she was to play.

No one was paying any attention to her; and Robert, seeing that her eyes were full of tears, endeavored to console her.

"Will you permit me to play your accompaniment,

mademoiselle?" he said, gently. "I am not a very brilliant performer; but if the music is not too difficult I think I can manage it."

"Thank you, monsieur; but I am in the habit of playing my own accompaniments," murmured the young girl, who was evidently greatly embarrassed.

"Very well. I will turn the pages for you then. Please do not send me away. I have met you this evening for the first time, and yet it seems to me that I have known you for years."

"I must admit that I can not rid myself of a similar impression," said the young girl, forcing back her tears, "though I am very sure that we never met before."

"I am equally sure of it, for if I had ever seen you I should not have forgotten it. But there is already a bond between us—my mother's name—that you heard in days gone by, and that you have remembered. We were evidently predestined to meet some day; and I feel very grateful to my friend Gustave for bringing me this evening to a house where I never set foot before."

"And which you will never visit again, I presume?"

"I certainly had no intention of doing so a few moments ago, but I have changed my mind. It would be too much of a deprivation never to see you again."

Mlle. Violette blushed to the very tips of her little ears; but instead of making any reply to this complimentary speech she struck a few chords, apparently at random, upon the piano. Robert perceived that she had beautiful hands —the hands of a duchess, white and slender, with pink, almond-shaped nails—and lowering his voice, he added:

"I shall come again, but solely on your account, as I can see you only at the house of this countess, who doesn't impress me very favorably, I must admit."

This time Violette turned pale; and drawing up her slender form haughtily she replied, without pausing in her prelude:

"Why do you speak to me in this way? I do not deserv that you should treat me as if I were one of those sil'y women who are flattered by any commonplace compliment. You evinced sympathy for me just now, and I feel grateful to you for your interest in a poor and friendless girl; but that is no reason why you should amuse yourself at my expense."

Then seeing that Robert was about to protest, she added, firmly:

"Do not deny it. To hear you one would suppose you had fallen in love with me at first sight; but I am neither a simpleton nor a coquette, and I know exactly what such protestations are worth. Do not attempt to thus mar my peace of mind. I have trouble enough now. What would my existence be if I should listen to you?"

The deep feeling that was so apparent beneath the sound good sense of this appeal surprised and charmed Robert de Becherel, who was utterly unprepared for it.

"I swear to you that I will never be guilty of a similar offense again, mademoiselle," he said, earnestly; "and now I have given you this assurance, will you allow me to remain near you while you sing?"

"Very willingly," exclaimed the young girl, who seemed to have regained all her wonted cheerfulness. "As you accept my conditions, I shall be delighted to talk with you; and there is nothing to prevent it, for I am not going to sing. What would be the use? They would not listen to me."

"These gentlemen and ladies do not evince much desire to hear you, strange as it may appear. They are all chattering like magpies; and I really can not understand why Mademoiselle Herminia asked you to go to the piano."

"The same thing happens almost every evening. The *habitués* of the house like to talk to the sound of instrumental music provided it is not too loud. It drowns the asides, you see. If I should sing they would perhaps feel

obliged to applaud occasionally, and their approval is a matter of no consequence to me, so I play Mozart to them in a subdued way so as not to disturb them."

"You are a lover of Mozart's music, are you not, mademoiselle?" inquired Robert, who adored the great composer.

"Yes; from my earliest childhood, when I began to take lessons upon the piano I happened to hear my teacher play an air from the 'Magic Flute' one day. It made such an impression upon me that before light the next morning I slipped into the music-room and began to play with one finger the air that had so charmed me. The Mother Superior heard me, and after a severe reprimand ordered me from the room. I rebelled—Mozart must have intoxicated me—I think—Heaven forgive me!—that I even struck the venerable mother. There was a terrible fuss made about it, and I came very near being expelled."

"I can hardly believe that you ever struck any one, mademoiselle."

"Then it is probably because I have had no cause to do so since that memorable day, for if you think that Heaven has endowed me with an angelic disposition you are very much mistaken, monsieur. I am very quick-tempered, and I fly into furious passions sometimes."

"Against the majestic Herminia or against the countess?" inquired Robert, laughing.

"No. They give me no cause. They pay me liberally for my lessons and my music, and I do my duty faithfully, so we are even. An occasional snub or slight is to be expected, and I endure them uncomplainingly. But we are talking too much. I see that people are beginning to look at us. What piece of Mozart's would you like to hear?"

"Any selection from 'Don Juan' that you please. Of all his operas that is my favorite."

Violette instantly began to play the serenade, and to play it as it should be played—softly and with exquisite feeling.

Robert forgot everything—Mme. de Malvoisine, her ponderous ward, and her noisy guests—in the charm of this delicious music that transported him to the land of dreams.

Then came the trio of the maskers, Zerlina's gay aria, and then the gloomy duet between Don Juan and the Statue of the Commander, "Pentiti! No! No!" played for Robert alone, for no one else pretended to listen.

"Do you know that you would be wonderfully successful on the stage?" exclaimed Becherel, enthusiastically.

"I have thought of that sometimes," replied the young girl, "but I prefer quiet happiness to brilliant triumphs."

"Happiness! How can you be happy in a house where you are treated with so little consideration? How can you bear the idea of always enduring the fate to which some undeserved misfortune has condemned you?"

Instead of replying to this invitation to relate the history of her life, Violette only smiled sadly, and began one of Beethoven's sonatas.

"I must beg you not to remain with me any longer," she said softly. "Herminia will never forgive me if I engross too much of your attention. Besides, we can see each other again before the end of the evening, for I shall not be able to leave the piano. I shall have to begin playing for them to dance presently."

"And I shall not even have the consolation of waltzing with you?"

"No, for I shall be tied fast to the piano; but while they are at supper we shall perhaps have an opportunity for a little chat. Now I ask you in all seriousness to leave me."

There was nothing for Robert to do but obey; but before he rose he exchanged a last glance with the fair girl beside him, and he fancied he read in her eyes that she was not in the least offended by his evident interest in her. The main thing now was to find some way of whiling away the time that must elapse before he could rejoin her; and he was at

a loss how to dispose of it, for he did not care to join the circle that had formed around the countess.

He felt strangely incensed against Herminia, and he distrusted Mme. de Malvoisine. Gustave had told him enough for him to understand that this majestic dame was trying to marry off her ward, and that he, Robert de Becherel, would be gladly welcomed as a suitor for the young lady's hand.

He had not the slightest intention of encouraging either lady in any such hope, but as he had determined to stay for the sake of securing another brief conversation with Mlle. Violette, he could hardly hope to escape the rather fulsome flattery of his hostess: but being anxious to postpone the evil hour as long as possible, he approached the card-table, where he found Gustave losing heavily, for just as Robert reached the table, he saw a gentleman who had just played the king pull a very good-sized pile of gold and bank-notes toward him.

"I have just lost my last sou," Gustave whispered. "Loan me fifty louis."

"I would gladly do so, if I had it about me," replied Becherel, considerably surprised by this unexpected call upon his purse.

"You have that amount, and a good deal more."

"But it belongs to my employer, and I must return it to-morrow morning."

"Don't be alarmed. You shall have the money back. We can go round by my lodgings when we leave here, and as I have fifteen thousand francs in my secretary, and an account at the Credit Lyonnais, I can pay you."

"I don't doubt it; still—"

"Oh, I see! You distrust me. Ah, well, let us say no more about it. I know what your friendship is worth now, and shall feel under no obligation to speak a good word for you to the golden-haired *pianiste* you seem to have taken such a fancy to."

Not much troubled by this threat, but greatly annoyed at being obliged to refuse an old friend a favor, Robert said to himself that he had one hundred louis laid by, and that if worst came to worst, and Gustave should fail to repay the loan, he would only have to take a thousand francs from his private purse.

"Here is a one thousand-franc note," he said, taking one from the package in his pocket-book. "I do not doubt your word, and shall certainly expect you to return the money to-morrow morning."

"Good! I have found my friend Becherel of the 24th Dragoons again: and, to show you that I bear you no ill-will on account of your hesitation, I will take you into partnership with me. You shall have half my winnings, and, as I feel it in my bones that I am going to have a wonderful run of luck, you will find yourself the possessor of a handsome sum before the evening is over."

"Very well; I accept your offer so far as—"

Robert did not have a chance to finish the sentence. Some one had just tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned hastily to see who had accosted him so familiarly.

Gustave took advantage of his opportunity, and rushed toward the card-table, flourishing the thousand franc note, and crying:

"It is my turn now. I claim my revenge!"

Robert found himself face to face with a gentleman about fifty years of age, tall, slim, and straight as a poplar, and wearing the rosette of an officer of the Legion of Honor in his button-hole.

"You here, colonel!" murmured Becherel, hanging his head like a school-boy detected in some grave misdemeanor.

"Yes, my boy," replied the new-comer, pulling his gray mustache: "so you are surprised to see me here? Ah, well! that proves you have never set foot here before, for I come here very often, and never think of concealing the fact. I am not married; I have an income of forty thou-

sand francs, and, since I left the army, I am as free as air; so I take my pleasure wherever I can find it. But what brings you here?"

"Nothing in particular. A friend I happened to meet this evening brought me."

"That big fellow who just borrowed that thousand franc note of you? He is one of the *habitués* of the house. How the deuce did you make his acquaintance?"

"We were in the same regiment."

"Yes; during your years of compulsory service, I suppose. If your father had listened to me, you would have enlisted again, and been an officer by this time."

"I would have asked nothing better than to remain in the army; but while I was serving out my term of enlistment, my mother became a widow, you know—"

"And she wanted you home again. I don't see that she is much better off now, however, as you are in Paris and she in Rennes. But you have a very good situation, at least I heard so when I was down in Brittany last summer. You have some property left, too, I hear. Your father didn't succeed in spending it all. Why have you never called on me since you have been living in Paris?"

"I really beg your pardon, colonel; I didn't know your address."

"A poor excuse, my boy. You could have discovered it at the War Department if you had taken the trouble to inquire. Besides, I am as well known as a white wolf. You had only to write to Monsieur Louis de Mornac, Retired Lieutenant-colonel, and your letter would have gone straight to No. 64 Rue de la Boëtie."

"I will atone for my neglect by calling very soon, if you allow me."

"I will not only permit it, but urge you to do so. I was very fond of your father, and you must need a word of advice from an old codger occasionally. Oh, don't be afraid! I've no intention of preaching to you, but I'll serve as

your pilot through the dangerous shoals and rapids of Parisian life if you wish. It is filled with wrecks—this stormy sea—I know all the rocks, and I will point them out to you. To begin with, would you like me to enlighten you about these people here?"

"I was just on the point of asking you to do so."

"Oh, well! it is a very easy matter. We will begin with the mistress of the house. I don't know where she obtained her title of countess, but I do know that she has never been married."

"I suspected as much. She is an adventuress, I suppose, who has succeeded in making a fortune."

"No; she was formerly a dress-maker, and made a fortune in the business. She has had several partners in the course of her long career—and has a silent partner even now—"

"He is here, probably. Point him out to me, colonel."

"No, he is not here. He is never here. He takes good care to keep away, but he and Madame de Malvoisine are as firmly united as the fingers of one's hand, for their interests are identical. There is a dead man between them."

"A dead man?"

"Yes; they must have committed some crime that served as the foundation of their fortune. No one ever told me so, but I would wager my right hand that they did. Besides, there is the child—"

"What child?"

"Why, Herminia, of course. Your friend Gustave probably told you that she was Madame de Malvoisine's ward, but if you had used your eyes, you would have seen that she was her daughter. They look as much alike as two drops of water."

"That is true; though I didn't notice the fact before. The father, I suppose—"

"Is Madame de Malvoisine's silent partner. They have never acknowledged her, so they can leave her their whole

fortune without violating the provision of the code that limits the portion of illegitimate children to one half of their parents' income. Besides, the father is legally married, perhaps. No one has ever seen his wife, but there is strong reason to suppose that she exists, nevertheless."

"A nice set, these people are! Would you believe it? Gustave had the assurance to pretend that I could secure the hand of this heiress if I chose—"

"He is right. The so-called countess and her partner would deem themselves only too fortunate if they could secure a son-in-law like yourself. It matters very little to them if this son-in-law is poor, provided he bears an honorable name. But I suppose you are not particularly anxious to enter this charming family?"

"I would rather marry a respectable washer-woman."

"You are a good, sensible fellow, and I hope that you will not hesitate to call upon me if I can ever be of the slightest service to you."

"Thank you, colonel," said Robert, quickly; "and I assure you that you will never have reason to blush for me. But I am surprised that Gustave should have advised me to enter the lists as a suitor."

"He is paid for it, probably. The father employs him in his speculations at the Bourse, and thus enables him to make a good deal of money. The father passes as the majestic Herminia's uncle, and it is more than likely that your friend Gustave doesn't know the real facts of the case. Like many other people, he is trying to make a fortune, and doesn't think it advisable to inquire too closely into the antecedents of the powerful financier who employs him. I have heard nothing to his discredit, but I would nevertheless advise you not to become too intimate with him."

"Oh, I will be prudent, never fear!"

"Your father was not, if you are; and his want of caution in such respects cost him dear. Profit by his experience, and don't frequent the society of people like these."

"I don't intend to; but it seems to me that you yourself, colonel, would do well—"

"Oh, it's very different with me! I'm an old stager, and I can enjoy myself when I please without much danger."

"And you enjoy yourself here?" asked Becherel, smiling. "Mademoiselle Herminia can hardly be the attraction, I think, nor her imposing mother."

"You don't understand the situation. This house is always filled with people who certainly would not be admitted into your mother's house, but who are not all hardened wretches, by any means. Indeed, among the number there are two or three ladies who are really very agreeable and worthy of interest. As for the men, the majority of them are persons one can associate with without compromising one's self. I see here, at this very moment, two gentlemen of my acquaintance, and members of the same club to which I belong. You will say, perhaps, that they gamble here. That is true, but the countess is too well off to feel any desire to make money out of her guests; and I am almost certain that there is no cheating. I know some highly respectable clubs of which one could not say as much."

"I don't want to bore you, colonel," said Robert, anxious to question him about a person in whom he already felt a deep interest; "but as you have so kindly enlightened me in regard to the mistress of the house, will you have the goodness to tell me what you think of the young lady at the piano?"

"Little Violette? She is a pearl, my dear young friend. Pretty as a pink, full of grace and talent, a musician of the first order, and as pure as a lily."

"I am satisfied of that. But what is her origin? Has she any relatives?"

"Not one. She was a foundling, I believe, or something of the kind. "I heard her story once, but I have almost forgotten it. There is some mystery under it all, I

believe. Ask the girl to tell you, and be as polite to her as you please; only recollect that as you don't think of marrying her, you would be doing very wrong if you amused yourself by turning her head. But now, my dear boy, I must leave you. I see a great friend of mine, the widow of a sea-captain, sitting over there in the corner, and I am going to take advantage of this opportunity to join her. I shall probably leave before you do. Come and take breakfast with me whenever you like—the sooner the better."

Having said this, M. de Mornac turned away, and in another minute or two Robert saw him cautiously making his way toward the fair widow.

Several new groups had formed, and Herminia was surrounded by a number of admiring young men, while the countess was chatting with a party of older gentlemen.

Violette, who seemed to be more alone than ever, continued her playing, though no one made any pretense of listening. She had forbidden Robert to rejoin her, and not daring to disobey the order, he could think of nothing better to do than mingle with the men who were crowding around the card-table.

His stakes were upon the table, as he had had the weakness to consent to the partnership proposed by Gustave, and he was not sorry to see how the game was progressing.

He believed himself capable of watching it, too, without any undue emotion, for he flattered himself that he was cured of the hereditary weakness of the Becherels.

He little thought that the demon of play was lying in wait for him there.

The mere sight of the gold spread out upon the table made him forget poor Violette, who was sadly performing the dreary task of a paid musician not far from the card-table.

Gustave already had his cards in his hand, and Robert reached the table just in time to hear him say, in a loud voice:

"I'll play against the crowd, gentlemen."

For one to engage in such a contest with any chance of success, a large amount of money is an absolute necessity; and Becherel asked himself if his friend had not lost his senses to thus enter the lists armed with only a one thousand franc note against gentlemen who were beginning with bets of five and even ten louis.

Already there were at least thirty-five louis on the table.

"He certainly must be mad," thought Robert. "However, I am involved only to the extent of the one thousand franc note, and if he should come to grief, I have the means of replacing the amount I was weak enough to loan him out of my employer's money, and if this hard-headed Gustave wants to play any more it will be at his own risk."

Robert had quite forgotten that he had not had time to add a restrictive clause to his acceptance of the proposed copartnership, when the colonel startled him by tapping him on the shoulder.

Just then Gustave glanced up, and, perceiving him, cried:

"Look here, my dear fellow, you have no right to watch these gentlemen's play, as you are in partnership with me. Come over on my side."

Becherel was strongly inclined to reply that the company was limited, as they say in England, when the liabilities of stockholders do not exceed a certain figure; but all eyes were fixed upon him, so he said nothing, but consoled himself with the thought that it would be time enough to withdraw when the money he had advanced was lost, and docilely placed himself behind his friend who had just covered the stakes of the other gentlemen with the banknote borrowed from Robert.

"Recollect that you are to give me no advice," said Gustave, carelessly. "I know how to play écarté, and I don't need your counsel."

Robert also prided himself upon being an excellent

player, but he was not at all anxious to take part in the contest, and for fear of becoming interested in it in spite of himself, he began to watch Violette instead of the cards.

That young lady had not left the piano, but she was no longer alone there. A man with a red beard had just planted himself behind the piano-stool, and was endeavoring to talk with her in a very confidential manner. She did her best to escape the fop's compliments and assiduous attentions, but failing, she finally struck up the liveliest quadrille the *habitués* of the Bal de l'Opera ever danced, and the noise drowned the voice of her admirer, who was obliged to cease his compliments and beat a retreat, though not without one last impertinent remark which Robert fortunately did not hear, for he would have promptly espoused the cause of the persecuted girl.

"The king!" announced Gustave, as he turned the eleventh card. "One point for me."

His opponent played first, and lost.

"Two more points!" exclaimed Gustave. "That makes three for me."

This was quite enough to make Becherel forget, at least momentarily, the scene he had just witnessed. The passion for play had seized him again, and he concentrated his whole attention upon the game so promisingly begun.

It ended still better, for Gustave took every trick on the deal that followed, and won.

This brilliant success did not elate Robert much, however. It was not the money that he cared for, it was the excitement of play; and he had not had a chance to experience much of that, owing to the fact that he and his friend had had it all their own way.

"Put up your money, gentlemen," said Gustave.

They did so, and the stakes amounted to quite a large sum, for nearly all who had been defeated doubled the amount of their bets.

This time the game was closely contested, and his adversaries gained four points before Gustave scored a single one; but he worked his way up, point by point, and the fortunate turning of a king of hearts on the fifth deal won him the game.

"Will you try another game?" he asked, drawing his winnings toward him.

There was some grumbling among the losers, who did not seem inclined to contend with a run of luck that threatened to become really formidable.

"What are the stakes?" cried the gentleman Violette had just snubbed so unmercifully.

"Whatever you please," replied Gustave, loftily.

"What! is it you, Piton?" responded the other, with a rather scornful air. "You are playing against the crowd! Can it be you have become a millionaire?"

"Not yet, my prince of brokers, but I have the wherewithal to pay you—if you win."

"Five hundred louis to begin with then."

"The devil!"

"I warn you that if you refuse, I shall play against the crowd in your place. That is the rule, you know."

During this conversation Robert examined the newcomer closely, and was not at all prepossessed in his favor. This young man who talked of beginning with a bet of ten thousand francs was extremely loud, both in manner and coloring. Everything about him indicated the *parvenu*, from his insolent air to the enormous gold watch chain that dangled upon his black vest. Becherel hated him already for having forced his unwelcome attentions upon Violette, and would willingly have given a year's salary for the privilege of boxing his ears, but he hoped that Gustave would firmly decline this unreasonable proposal.

But Gustave, after hesitating an instant, replied:

"Here goes for five hundred louis then!"

"Very well. I'll play on those conditions. Bring out

your money, my dear fellow. I play only on a cash basis, and you haven't ten thousand francs there before you."

As he spoke he deposited upon the table a pocket-book stuffed with bank-notes.

"My partner will complete the amount," said Gustave. "Robert, my good fellow, pass me the reserve."

Becherel opened his lips to say that he would risk no more money, when he saw that the young *parvenu* was surveying him with a supercilious, even sneering air, and the pride and anger aroused by this impertinence deprived him of his usual prudence and good sense to such an extent that he drew from his pocket the nine one thousand franc notes that remained there, and handed them to his imprudent companion without a word.

At that moment he would have risked his entire patrimony rather than flinch before this purse-proud and vulgar youth, who now turned to Gustave with the sneering remark:

"This gentleman is your banker, it seems. I should never have suspected it."

"And why, sir?" demanded Becherel, in a more and more aggressive tone.

"Simply because you don't look like a capitalist. One can't have everything in this world, you know."

"I at least have a habit of correcting ill-bred persons, and I—"

"Gentlemen! gentlemen!" cried the other players.

"I will take you at your word, and we will settle this affair after this game is ended."

"Whenever you please."

"Let me see, whose deal is it? Yours, Piton, I believe. Try not to turn the king of hearts too often — of all hearts"—he added, with a side glance at Becherel, who, though inwardly boiling with rage, took no notice of this allusion to his personal charms.

Gustave not only failed to turn the king, but gave it to his opponent, who scored a point with it.

The game began badly for Gustave and his friend, and the next deal proved equally unfavorable.

"Two and one make three, in my arithmetic," said the enemy coarsely, as he slapped his last card down upon the table.

Gustave began to look anxious, but Robert, who had forgotten everything in his anger against Violette's persecutor, was only waiting for the end of the game in order to challenge this odious creature.

Gustave dealt a second time; his opponent asked for the cards, and Gustave, being in doubt, concluded to consult his friend.

"Advise me," he said.

"No," replied Robert, unwilling to assume the responsibility of giving advice under such circumstances.

"No?" repeated Gustave, questioningly.

"Very well, then, I will play," replied his opponent quickly, spreading out three cards upon the table, "and you have lost, for I have the ace and the queen of trumps. I planned to make two points by refusal, and unless you have the king—"

"But I did not refuse—"

"Pardon me, your partner said no."

"That was only in reply to the question I put to him. Besides, I alone have the right to reply, as I am the person who holds the cards."

"Granted, but you, too, replied with a distinctly uttered no. I leave it to these gentlemen."

The by-standers unanimously declared Gustave in the wrong, and he was now obliged to yield.

"You have had enough, I fancy," remarked the victor, as he pocketed the spoil.

"On the contrary, I'll play another game for the same stakes," said Gustave, angrily.

"For cash, or on time?"

"If I lose you shall be paid before noon to-morrow."

"That is contrary to my principles. Still, I'll do it this once to oblige you."

"Let us draw for deal, then."

Robert said to himself: "I have nothing to do with it this time, for Gustave did not ask me if I wanted my revenge or not."

The game began, and Gustave lost it on the third deal.

"It is all your own fault, my dear fellow," his opponent remarked to him. "You ought to know that the strongest side always wins the victory. Don't trouble yourself about the payment of the money. If you give it to me to-morrow after the Bourse closes that will be time enough. Now, gentlemen," he added, turning to the other players, "I'll take Piton's place, and give you all a chance at me."

"Don't forget that you and I have another matter to settle," said Robert de Becherel, whose wrath had only been increased by Gustave's defeat.

"I am aware of that," replied the victor, dryly. "Send your seconds to me whenever you please. Your friend Piton will give you my address."

"Put up your money, gentlemen."

Gustave, who had risen from the table in very bad humor, dragged Becherel into one corner of the room, and said to him angrily:

"What has put this absurd idea of fighting with Galimas into your head?"

"Galimas is your late opponent, I suppose?"

"Yes, and he is one of the richest brokers in Paris."

"I don't care if he is."

"But I do. He has put me in the way of making a good deal of money at the Bourse, and I don't want to get in a quarrel with him, I assure you. You are angry with him because he ventured to pay the fair Violette a few compliments. That is no reason for challenging him.

Besides, before carrying this absurd altercation any further, we must pay him what we owe him."

"Very true. I was foolish enough to go shares with you in the game for one thousand francs, so I am a loser to the amount of five hundred francs."

"You don't seem to understand the situation, my dear fellow. The ten thousand francs you gave me represent your share of the loss. I will pay Galimas the other ten thousand, and we shall then be square."

"I do not see the matter in this light," said Robert, hastily. "Our copartnership was not unlimited. You chose to risk twenty thousand francs on two games of écarté. You might have risked and lost one hundred thousand just as well, for you did it without consulting me."

"Then you ought to have announced your determination to withdraw, but you not only failed to say anything of the kind, but placed yourself directly behind me as if to publicly declare yourself my partner. Besides, everybody saw you hand me the bank-notes. If you choose to deny your obligations now, well and good. I thought you a man of honor. I was mistaken, and I must take the consequences."

Becherel turned pale with anger, but he managed to control himself.

"Listen, Gustave," he said. "No one else could say what you have just said to me with impunity, but I don't want to quarrel with an old comrade, and as you really seem to consider me your partner in this loss, I will consent to pay half the amount. But I haven't the money, as you know very well, so I must ask you to loan it to me for a few days—just long enough to write to my mother and receive her reply. She will send me the money, I am sure, even if she has to mortgage some of our real estate to obtain it."

"I can settle with Galimas to-morrow, on a pinch, as I

have fifteen thousand francs at home, but I haven't twenty thousand, and you must return to your employer's safe to-morrow morning the ten thousand francs that just found their way into that lucky dog's pocket."

"Then there is nothing left for me to do but blow my brains out," said Becherel, gloomily.

"How absurdly you talk! When one has four hundred thousand francs worth of real estate a man needn't worry himself about a paltry ten thousand francs. If he needs that amount he has only to borrow it."

"Of whom? You haven't the money, and I must have it to-morrow morning."

"Of Cash on Delivery."

"What do you mean?"

"Of Marcaudier, then."

"And who is Marcaudier, pray?"

"A usurer who has accommodated me in a similar way at least a dozen times."

"But he doesn't know me."

"He knows me, and he will be ready and willing to loan you ten thousand francs, and even a much larger amount on my recommendation. He is not so very exorbitant in his charges either. He won't ask you more than thirty per cent. interest, and that will include everything."

"How very reasonable he must be in his demands," said Becherel, with an ironical grimace. "I am in no situation to haggle about terms, however. And you think the matter can be arranged in the morning?"

"I'll answer for that."

"And you will go with me when I call on him?"

"No. If I did, he would perhaps regard it merely as an act of complaisance on my part, prompted by a desire to oblige an old friend. It would be better for me to see him alone, I think. I will call on him to-morrow morning at eight o'clock, and explain your situation and your resources. He has great confidence in me, and if you will

drop in at nine o'clock I feel sure that you can have your money ten minutes afterward."

"I hope you will not tell him that the money so foolishly lost did not belong to me."

"Certainly not. I shall not even tell him that you are in Labitte's employ. I shall represent you in the light of a young spendthrift."

"That makes no difference to me. I will call on this man at nine o'clock precisely. Where does he live?"

"In a dingy little street known as the Rue Rodier, between the Rue Choron and the Avenue Trudaine."

"I shall have no difficulty in finding it, I think."

"Well. Marcaudier lives on the third floor of No. 24. The porter will tell you which staircase to take; and when you reach his door ring three times in quick succession. Marcaudier doesn't open his doors to everybody. He is afraid of thieves and of gossips, but he will admit you, for I will warn him of your intended visit. When you are once in his office tell him what you want plainly, and don't be afraid to assert yourself. Usurers of his stamp are like women—to obtain what you want of them you must bully them a little."

"I'll follow your advice as far as possible; and as you are going to intercede in my behalf, I shall count upon taking the ten thousand francs away with me. I shall have no difficulty in obtaining the money through my attorney at Rennes before the note I have to give this old Shylock matures. Now to change the subject, will you act as my second?"

"What! are you really in earnest about fighting with Galimas?"

"I shall fight with him unless the man is a coward."

"Oh, he's not a coward. He fights just like everybody else when he has to, and isn't a bad shot I've heard, though I don't know much about it. I wouldn't think of fighting with him though if I were in your place. He has the worst

tongue of any man I know; and if you insist upon fighting with him he will tell everybody that it is on account of your pretty *pianiste*, and he will not hesitate to ruin the poor girl's reputation if he can. The countess will be sure to dismiss her; and Mademoiselle Violette will be left without a home and without resources."

"I should be very sorry indeed to injure her, but I can not allow the matter to end here. Galimas just told me that he should expect a visit from my seconds."

"Ah, well, come and breakfast with me at Champeaux to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock, and we'll talk the matter over. You can tell me, too, about your visit to Marcaudier, and afterward we will go together to the Bourse, and I'll manage to bring about an interview with Galimas, who will apologize, I promise you, if you will leave the matter to me."

"If he is willing to do that I shall accept his apology, of course. So it is decided, to-morrow morning, after restitution's made, I shall ask my employer for a day's leave, and he will not refuse my request, I am sure."

"I am not a bad fellow at heart, you see, my friend," remarked Gustave. "It was a great pity that I brought you here, as we have both lost quite a large sum in consequence of our visit; but I have devised a means of getting you out of the scrape; and as for the loss we have sustained, it won't prove the death of us. It has made me terribly hungry though. Come, let's go and get something to eat."

"No, thank you. I am going home. I've had enough of your countesses and rich young brokers. You can remain longer if you choose, but I am going to take my departure."

"Very well; just as you please. You won't go without taking leave of your new divinity, I suppose. It seems to me that she is gazing rather anxiously in this direction. Don't keep her pining. I'm going into the dining-room to make the acquaintance of a *pâté de foie-gras*.

until to-morrow. Take the carriage that brought us here. I can easily find another if I want it."

The card-playing was still in progress; but the room had undergone a decided change in aspect. All the ladies, including Mme. de Malvoisine and Mlle. Herminia, had gone out to supper; Colonel Mornac was nowhere to be seen; Violette was still playing waltzes and quadrilles.

Robert joined her, and was greatly surprised to find her in tears.

"What is the matter, mademoiselle?" he asked, almost affectionately.

"I have heard all that has passed," faltered the young girl. "You have had a quarrel—you are going to fight—"

"Do not worry about that, mademoiselle. The affair is likely to be amicably adjusted; and if you have no other cause for anxiety—"

"Madame de Malvoisine has just given me my dismissal. My engagement with her ceases to-morrow."

"This is infamous! What is her pretext? Of what does she accuse you? Of having answered when I spoke to you? It would seem that I am the cause of this misfortune."

"That fact need not grieve you, sir. I have long been weary of the humiliations I am forced to endure here. I shall live as I have always lived—by my music—and I shall at least be my own mistress."

"And am I never to see you again?" exclaimed Robert.

"Why not? I feel sure that I can trust you. Tell me where I can write to you; and if you will promise me to offer me only your friendship, I—"

Robert drew a card from his pocket-book and slipped it into the hand of Violette, who as she took it, whispered:

"Leave me now, I entreat you. Those gentlemen are watching us with evident curiosity."

Robert bowed and hastened from the room, carrying with him a hope that in a measure consoled him for his pecuniary losses.

CHAPTER II.

Though he was twenty-four years old, Robert de Becherel still cherished many of the illusions and much of the enthusiasm of youth.

This was due in a very great measure to the training he had received as well as to his temperament.

The son of a pleasure-loving father, and a mother pious almost to austerity, tender almost to weakness, and ignorant of the world and its wickedness, Robert had inherited many of the virtues and faults of both parents.

From his father he had inherited a heedlessness or perhaps rather an unconsciousness of the duties and responsibilities of life—from his mother, wonderful kindness of heart and delicacy of feeling, as well as a dangerous credulousness and naïveté.

Three years spent in the ancient capital of Brittany after his term of military service had expired had been a disadvantage rather than an advantage to him.

In Rennes, where his name opened every door to him, he soon became a great favorite. His handsome face, his distinguished manners and appearance, and his genial disposition made him the admiration of every heiress in the town in spite of the smallness of his fortune, which had been seriously impaired by the author of his being. They forgave him everything—his fondness for play, as well as his conquests outside of the aristocratic circles, whose spoiled darling he was.

Consequently there had been nothing to prevent him from making a brilliant marriage in his native province. His mother desired it very much; and he adored his mother; but he soon became surfeited with these provincial triumphs, and one fine day he took it into his head to try Parisian life for awhile.

One of his father's old friends, M. Labitte, was the head of a large banking-house, and had offered him a position as private secretary. Mme. de Becherel had finally become reconciled to the separation from her son, for she felt that the change might be an advantage to him, and thus far she had no cause to regret her decision, for Robert had shown a decided taste for his new duties and had fulfilled them with exemplary zeal.

He had been cured, too, in a great measure, of his conceit: his natural refinement had preserved him from vice; and in the maelstrom of Parisian life, where all ranks are confounded, he had conducted himself in an eminently respectable and praiseworthy manner.

All this, however, had been due to chance rather than to any remarkable strength of character, as the ease with which he had been enticed into the salon where he had just seen and heard so many startling things and lost ten thousand francs that did not belong to him conclusively proved.

He reached home about two o'clock in the morning, and slept but little the rest of the night, so deeply was his mind engrossed with the folly of which he had been guilty.

And yet his losses at the card-table did not trouble him very much, for he felt comparatively sure of being able to borrow the money the next morning, and cared very little about the heavy rate of interest he would be compelled to pay for it.

The culpable act of which he had been guilty in making this disposition of M. Labitte's money did not strike him very forcibly; and he would have been greatly surprised if any one had told him that he had been guilty of a breach of confidence. The all-important thing, in his eyes, was to restore the money; and if he had found it impossible to make restitution he would not have hesitated to confess the truth to his employer.

The moral side of the act escaped his notice entirely;

but, strange to say, he bitterly reproached himself for thus grieving his mother, who would be sure to learn sooner or later that her son had been obliged to mortgage his property to meet the demands of an usurer.

Such was this young man, endowed by nature with many admirable traits of character, but subsequently spoiled by the example of a dissipated father and the excessive indulgence of an angelic mother. His heart was all that could be desired: he lacked only firmness and strength of character.

During the hours that elapsed between his departure from the salon on the Rue du Rocher and his compulsory visit to M. Marcaudier, the lovely Violette was ever in his thoughts; for the mystery that surrounded her only enhanced her charms in the eyes of a person endowed with such a vivid imagination.

Whence came this beautiful young girl; this beautiful *artiste?* and what strange series of events had transformed the child reared in the convent at Rennes into the paid musician of a spurious countess? Colonel Mornac, whose judgment could certainly be relied on in such matters, did not hesitate to vouch for her virtue, and even the skeptical Gustave had naught but good to say of her.

Robert, who was more than willing to believe them, anxiously asked himself what would become of her now that Mme. de Malvoisine had dismissed her? Had she been living in the house on the Rue du Rocher? He had neglected to ask; and as he never intended to set foot there again he was by no means sure that he would ever see her. She had accepted his card, it is true, but would she write to him? And even if she did, how could he be of any assistance to her in the trying position in which she was placed?

These questions and many of a similar nature disturbed his slumbers much more than the recollection of the game of écarté and his quarrel with Galimas; and finally after thinking over the situation long and carefully he resolved

to embrace the first opportunity to call upon the colonel, who certainly would not refuse to give him all the information in his power and perhaps some good advice as well.

A little consoled by the hope of soon solving this mystery Robert rose about half past seven o'clock and rang for his groom—for this secretary with a salary of five hundred francs a month had a groom and a very charming suite of bachelor apartments, exactly as if he had lived in those days when the heroes of Paul de Kock's romances kept their cabriolets and lived sumptuously upon a yearly income of six thousand francs.

The groom was the son of one of his tenants who resided near Prevalaye, and who was devotedly attached to his young master.

The rooms had been furnished by Mme. de Becherel, who had come up to Paris for the express purpose of seeing her son comfortably established there, and she had done things very handsomely. Robert had a parlor, a bedroom and a smoking-room, all furnished in exquisite taste. Nothing was wanting, not even objects of art: and Robert enjoyed these pleasant surroundings so much that he breakfasted there almost every day, Jean, his groom, having sufficient knowledge of cookery to prepare the traditional cutlet and eggs very creditably.

His duties as private secretary occupied Robert only two hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon, so he had plenty of leisure time: and he generally employed it in a pretty sensible fashion.

That day he began by writing to M. Labitte, asking to be excused from coming to the office that morning, but making no allusion to the ten thousand francs; for he felt sure that his employer would not think of inquiring if the money had been delivered, and he wanted to have time to secure the loan that would enable him to reimburse the amount.

Having finished this note and intrusted it to Jean for de-

livery, Robert made a hasty toilet and started out to pay his visit to Marcaudier.

The Rue Rodier, where the usurer lived, was not far from the Boulevard Poissonnière, so as it was only half past eight Robert had plenty of time to reach the place before the appointed hour without taking a carriage. Gustave had warned him that Marcaudier did not reside in a palace; but the house bearing the number mentioned by his friend was so unprepossessing in its aspect that Robert was loath to enter it.

"It looks like a den of infamy," he muttered, "and as it shelters a usurer, I suspect that it is. It is hard to believe that any capitalist would live in such a dingy hole; but what of that? provided he gives me the ten thousand francs I want, here and now, that is all I ask."

He finally concluded to cross the threshold, and, while groping his way through a dark hall, he stumbled over the first step of a rickety staircase. Keeping a tight hold on the baluster, he had cautiously mounted about a dozen steps, when he saw a lurid light, and heard a husky voice cry:

"What do you want?"

The sound proceeded from a sort of niche in the wall, and Robert had considerable difficulty in discerning the person who thus addressed him. He was only partially successful in his efforts, in fact; but the strong smell of cooking that greeted his nostrils satisfied him that the dim light that was flickering before his eyes came from a fire on which some of the dishes particularly affected by porters and portresses were in course of preparation.

"Did you come for the locks?"

This time Becherel perceived that the voice was that of a woman, and he attempted to enter her den, but the shrill mew of a cat made him start back.

"Take care! you came near stepping on Mistigris!" cried the same voice that had first addressed him.

Mistigris was a cat whose green eyes shone weirdly

through the darkness, as if to complete the diabolical aspect of this porter's lodge, which is one's very ideal of a witch's den.

"I want to see Monsieur Marcaudier," said Robert.

Instead of replying, the woman stooped over the fire, and, rising with a lighted candle in her hand, advanced to the door.

A more hideous old hag never startled the eyes of man. The most prominent feature of her repulsive face was her hooked nose, which instantly reminded one of the beak of a bird of prey. Her clothing was nothing more or less than a mass of rags of every texture and color; and though she peered at Robert closely with her round owl-like eyes, she seemed in no haste to reply.

"Have you lost your tongue?" cried Becherel, stamping his foot impatiently.

The woman recoiled, and the frightened cat darted out upon the staircase where she crouched, growling sullenly.

"What do you want of Monsieur Marcaudier?" inquired the portress at last.

"That is none of your business, and as you don't seem inclined to answer me, I am going up. I know that his rooms are on the third floor, and I shall certainly be able to find the door."

The old hag retreated into her den, mumbling some insult, and after ascending a few steps higher, Becherel was able to see his way a little more clearly, for the dingy frames of a window which must have opened upon some inner court-yard or well admitted sufficient light for him to be able to distinguish two doors upon the landing. They were both closed, however, and were probably no longer in use, for there was neither knob or lock upon them.

"A strange house, this!" Robert said to himself. "This usurer can't derive much of an income from this old rookery, for he don't seem to have many tenants. Indeed, if the next story is like this he hasn't any."

On reaching the landing on the floor above, he again found himself confronted by two doors which bore no name or inscription, but he perceived that one of them was slightly ajar, so he pushed it open, and found that it led into a dimly lighted passage the further end of which he could not see.

"This house is a perfect labyrinth," he muttered. "Gustave, before sending me here, ought to have given me a plan of it to aid me in finding my way. Mr. Cash on Delivery is perhaps to be found at the end of this corridor, so I'll try it."

He was obliged to walk some distance before he reached the end of the passage.

"I had no idea that this narrow old rookery was half so deep," he thought. "It 'seems to extend way back to the Rue des Martyrs. It's as dark as a pocket here, and if I go on much further, I shall dash my brains out against the wall or fall into some hole. Can it be that Gustave was playing a joke on me?"

He was about to retrace his steps when he heard a low moaning sound that seemed to come from further down the corridor.

"Can it be they are murdering somebody in this den?" he muttered. "Or, is it the usurer's victims who are groaning as if he were putting them to the torture? I mean to find out what is going on here."

And without any further hesitation, he again started down the corridor. The further he went the more distinct the sound became, and soon there was no longer any room for doubt. It was the voice of some one moaning and weeping, and the voice seemed to be that of a woman.

After groping a few steps further through the darkness, Becherel encountered an obstacle that prevented any further progress, and on feeling it with his hands he found that this obstacle was an iron door, secured by ponderous locks and bars like those of a prison.

To satisfy himself that he was not mistaken, he applied his ear to the door, and now fancied he heard incoherent words as well as sobs.

He could distinguish only one word, however, but that was repeated again and again, and sounded like "Mign-onne."

The ending was certainly "onne."

This word too seemed to be rather an appeal than a complaint. To whom could it be addressed? Robert had no idea, but he said to himself that when one cried out in this way it was because one needed aid, so he rapped loudly on the door, and cried at the top of his voice:

"I say, who are you in there? What do you want? What can I do for you?"

There was not only no reply, but the sound suddenly ceased.

Becherel pounded on the door again, with all his might this time, but with no better success than before.

The person who had been weeping and moaning so wildly a few minutes before was silent now, as a dog confined in his kennel ceases to howl when he hears the crack of his master's whip.

"The deuce take the woman!" muttered Becherel. "I'm a fool to trouble myself about the whimpering of a girl who can't answer when she is spoken to, and as I've evidently made a mistake in the door, I'll make one more attempt to find Marcaudier. He has strange goings-on in his house, and I intend to tell him so if I succeed in finding him. To tell the truth, I'm terribly afraid of falling through some trap-door in this infernal corridor."

He succeeded in making his way out of it without any accident, however, and finally found himself in front of the other door, which was locked and provided with a bell. He perceived, too, for the first time, that the lock of the door he had pushed open was missing, and understood now why the portress had inquired if he was the locksmith.

In compliance with the instructions he had received from Gustave, Robert rang three times in quick succession.

Several minutes elapsed before any notice was taken of the summons, and Robert was on the point of ringing again, when a face, illumined by a pair of tawny eyes, suddenly appeared behind a small opening in the wall.

"I would like to see Monsieur Marcaudier," said Robert.

"I am he," replied a deep bass voice. "Who are you?"

"I was sent here by my friend, Gustave Piton."

A bolt was drawn; the door opened, and the voice replied in gentler tones:

"I was expecting you. Come in, my dear sir."

"This man is certainly very familiar," thought Becherel. "He never saw me before, and yet he calls me dear sir. This extreme politeness is likely to cost me dear."

To his very great surprise, Robert found himself in a large and elegantly furnished room. There was a Louis Seize desk of richly carved mahogany, several luxurious arm-chairs, a profusion of costly ornaments, and even a book-case filled with richly bound volumes.

Though it was now nine o'clock in the morning, the room was lighted by two large lamps, and this fact was a surprise, though one would not have suspected that it was daylight without, for the windows—if there were any—were entirely concealed by hangings of antique tapestry.

"Will you take a chair, my dear sir?" continued Marcaudier, seating himself at his desk. "I have just received a visit from our mutual friend, Piton, and know to what I am indebted for the honor of this call."

"Then it is unnecessary for me to explain—"

"Entirely unnecessary. Gustave has told me all. You accompanied him to the house of the Countess de Malvoisine last evening, and while there you both took part in a game of écarté, in which you lost ten thousand francs,

which must be paid this morning, as you owe the money to Galimas, who will not trust you for twenty-four hours; so you have come to ask me to loan you the money."

"Yes. Gustave assured me that you would be willing to do so."

"And he was perfectly right, my dear sir. I like to accommodate young gentlemen when the state of my finances permits me to do so without personal inconvenience; so I am going to let you have the ten thousand francs you need. I am anxious, first, to say a word or two about myself, however. You thought, probably, that your friend had sent you to a common usurer: you must see now that I do not look like one."

This was certainly the truth. Marcaudier had a pleasant face; he was dressed like a gentleman, and did not appear to be over forty-five years of age.

Robert was so amazed at this preamble that he could only bow his assent.

"You are not to understand from this that I oblige those who apply to me without some compensation," continued Marcaudier. "In return for the ten thousand francs I am going to loan you, you must give me your note for eleven thousand francs, payable three months from date; so I loan you the money at a rate of interest which fools call usurious, but I have my own ideas on this subject. I hold that money is a commodity whose value varies as much as that of a house which is rented more or less dearly according to the difficulty its owner meets with in securing tenants. The fact that the Bank of France raises or lowers its rate of discount, according to the scarcity or abundance of the commodity, is certainly sufficient proof of the justice of my reasoinng."

"He evidently intends to put me through a course of political economy," thought Becherel.

"And, to conclude with another case in point, you would not have applied to me if you had not found yourself in

pressing need of money. The security you can offer would enable you to secure a loan of a much larger amount through any notary, and at a rate of interest certainly not exceeding five per cent."

"It was Gustave who told you this."

"I have not relied upon him alone for my information. I have known you for some time, or rather, I have been acquainted with your financial condition. Your fortune is not large, but it is substantial, as it consists of unencumbered real estate. You wonder how I happen to be so well informed. I am acquainted with Monsieur Labitte, and he has spoken of you."

"I hope you will not mention this matter to him," exclaimed Robert.

"For what do you take me? I am discreet by profession, like a physician; besides, I can very readily understand your unwillingness to be regarded as a gambler by your employer. The negotiation we have just concluded will be known only to you and me. I forgot to mention Piton, but, though he is rather thoughtless, he is too intimate with you to say anything that would be likely to injure you."

"He is not such an intimate friend as you perhaps suppose. I used to know him quite well, but we had not seen each other for years, when I happened to meet him last evening."

"Yes; he told me all about it, and, believe me, he has some very excellent traits in spite of his foibles. He does very wrong to squander money as he does; but he makes a good deal. He is a shrewd fellow—a man of brains, unquestionably. He will certainly succeed in making a large fortune some day, and he might, perhaps, assist you in making yours."

"That is a subject on which I am not bestowing much thought just now," said Becherel, with an impatient movement.

Marcaudier saw the gesture, and it was in an entirely different tone that he said:

"Pardon me, sir. When I find myself in congenial company, I am too prone to talk, and to neglect business matters as in the present instance. The negotiation is virtually concluded, however, and there is nothing more to be done but for you to give me your note in exchange for the ten thousand francs. Here they are. I always pay cash on delivery."

As he spoke, he placed upon the desk a package of bank-notes he had just taken from one of the drawers.

"You smile," he remarked, glancing at Becherel. "I see that Gustave has told you the name I go by—Cash on Delivery. It is an expression I frequently use in my business, so the gay young men who make it the business of their lives to enjoy themselves, and poke fun at more serious-minded people, have fallen into the habit of calling me by that name. I believe they even style me Father Cash on Delivery—I, who have never had either wife or children, and who am an incorrigible old bachelor. But pardon me, my dear sir, for again wandering from the subject. Will you have the goodness to sign this, and add your address to your name? Oh, yes, and write above your name, 'Good for eleven thousand francs.' I will fill out the rest of the note myself. The time is to be three months, is it not?"

"Three months," repeated Robert.

"That is all. Please take the trouble to count the notes."

"They are all right," replied Becherel, rising and slipping the money into his pocket. "There is nothing left for me to do now, sir, but compliment you on the courtesy with which you transact business matters, and bid you good-morning."

"One word more, my dear sir, before you go. This is the first time you ever did me the honor to call on me,

and you are doubtless astonished to find me in such a miserable old barrack."

"I must admit that the external appearance of your house rather surprised me," replied Robert.

"Why do you not frankly admit that it frightened you?" returned Marcaudier, laughing. "You must excuse me for having received you here. Gustave ought simply to have taken you with him to the Bourse to-day. I go there every day, and he knows where to find me. It is true, however, that I seldom get there before one o'clock, and that you were in a hurry for the money. Gustave knows my habits. I attend to matters of this kind here between the hours of eight and ten in the morning, but I do not reside in this old rookery, I assure you. On the contrary, I have a very cozy little house on the Rue Mozart, in Passy. The old rattle-trap in which you find me was a part of the inheritance I received from an uncle, so I have furnished a room here, and left the rest of the house in charge of a woman as old and hideous as the building she guards. It is a convenient place to meet people who desire my services and whom I do not care to receive in my own home. As for the old woman you must have seen in the porter's lodge she was in the employ of my deceased uncle, and is devoted to me."

"She took me for a locksmith."

"Impossible!"

"But she did. She nearly snapped my head off when I inquired if you were at home, and then she asked me if I had come for the locks."

"She could not have seen you very plainly. It's as dark as Egypt on the stairs."

"So dark that I had a good deal of difficulty in finding my way up, especially as I met no one."

"Naturally. I have made no effort to rent the other apartments, which are only fit for kennels. I have even had the doors nailed up."

"You are not alone in the house, however."

"Pardon me. I am entirely alone—unless you count Mother Rembriche, my portress."

"But I have reason to know that the room at the end of the other passage on this floor is occupied."

"You are mistaken. The door next to mine opens into a dark passage that has no other outlet."

"I found the door standing ajar; the lock had been removed, and I entered the passage."

Here Marcaudier gave a nervous start that did not escape Becherel's attentive eye.

"Yes, I entered it," he continued, "and walked down to the end of the passage."

"If you did, you must have broken your nose," sneered Marcaudier, who had already regained his self-possession. "I have never explored the passage you speak of, but I know that there is a solid wall at the further end of it."

"There is a wall, I admit, but there is a door in it."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, a door heavily barred with iron. There is nothing to prevent you from convincing yourself of the fact if you wish to do so."

"What good would it do. This house adjoins another, in regard to whose owner and inmates I know positively nothing. Possibly both houses once belonged to the same person, but they were sold separately, and my uncle must have closed up all communication between them. You found the door securely locked, I suppose?"

"Very securely. I pounded upon it, and even kicked it, but it showed no signs of yielding."

"But why were you so determined to gain an entrance, my dear sir?" asked Marcaudier, laughing.

"Because I heard some one—a woman I think—moaning and crying on the other side of the door, but as soon as I began to rap the sound ceased. I should not have men-

tioned the fact, however, if you had not told me that there was no one in the house but yourself."

"I am greatly indebted to you for the information, I assure you, and I shall send for a mason and have the door leading into this passage, as well as into the adjoining house, walled up immediately, so if you ever honor me with another visit, as I sincerely hope you will, you will not be subjected to a similar annoyance."

Becherel bowed without replying, for he was resolved to have no further dealings with M. Marcaudier, and he was already maneuvering to reach the door when the usurer remarked, with real or pretended carelessness:

"May I venture to ask if you spent a pleasant evening at Madame de Malvoisine's?"

"Not sufficiently agreeable to console me for the loss of ten thousand francs," replied Robert, dryly.

"True! But aside from that slight misfortune—which has already been repaired—you must have enjoyed yourself, and must certainly have noticed Mademoiselle Herminia des Andrieux."

"Gustave introduced me to her."

"She is a charming young lady, is she not? And she will be very rich some day, a fact that certainly does not detract from her good looks. I know her uncle well. He is worth several millions, and will leave all his property to her. If you are looking for a wife, you certainly could not find a more desirable one than the young lady in question."

"I have no intention of marrying at present," Robert answered brusquely.

"Then you are making a great mistake. Of course I understand that at your age a young man likes to enjoy himself, but one need not prevent the other, and you really ought to think of the future."

"I am greatly obliged to you, sir, for your advice, but it is time for me to be at the office, and—"

"Excuse me, excuse me, my dear sir. What I said was entirely on your own account, but I have no right to dictate to you, and I bitterly reproach myself for having detained you so long when Monsieur Labitte is waiting for you." added Marcaudier, stepping aside to let Becherel pass.

The latter heaved a sigh of relief on finding himself again in the street, with the money safe in his pocket, for though he could not but be grateful to Gustave Piton for sending him to this usurer, he could not help wondering if he had not fallen into bad hands.

Mr. Cash on Delivery seemed to him a very suspicious character, and he fancied there must be some sort of a bond between him and Mme. de Malvoisine; besides, he said to himself, that in ordinary life a loan like that he had just negotiated was not treated so lightly. He suspected, too, that the moans he had heard in the corridor were not those of a sick woman, and that they did not come from an adjoining house, as Marcaudier had declared.

"Still, why should I worry myself into a fever about these matters?" he exclaimed, trying to drive these unpleasant suspicions from his mind. "I have the money, and three months to pay it in. They can't compel me to marry the huge Herminia, so what do I care for all their plotting and planning."

He was anxious to return the ten thousand francs to his employer's safe as soon as possible now. He might postpone doing so until the following day, as he had just written to M. Labitte that he would not be at the office that day, but he thought it would be better to get the money out of his hands without delay.

He was not to breakfast with Gustave until eleven o'clock, so he had plenty of time to go to the Rue d'Enghien before the hour appointed for meeting his friend at the restaurant on the Place de la Bourse.

He accordingly wended his way there, but instead of go-

ing straight into the banker's office as usual, he paused in the office of the cashier—a kind-hearted old man with whom he was on the best of terms.

"My dear Maringard," he remarked, "Monsieur Labitte requested me to deliver ten thousand francs last evening to one of the clients of the house, a Monsieur de Brangue, who resides on the Rue de l'Arcade. I did not find the gentleman at home, so I have brought the money back."

"You had better give it to Monsieur Labitte," replied the cashier. "He probably took it from his own private purse, and I am not authorized to receive it."

"Put it in the safe. It won't make any difference, and I don't want to see Monsieur Labitte, for I wrote to him just now requesting leave of absence for to-day."

"He can not have received your note then, for he is expecting you. I received a message from him just now, requesting me to send you into his private office as soon as you came in."

"The deuce! I'm afraid he'll keep me, and I had planned to spend my day very differently. There seems to be no help for it, though, so I shall have to make the best of it. I hope he won't keep me long."

M. Labitte's office adjoined that of the cashier, and Robert had only to open the door to enter it.

He found the banker engaged in writing a letter.

"I have brought back the ten thousand francs you intrusted to me, sir," Robert began. "Monsieur de Brangue was not at home, and—"

"Sit down," interrupted M. Labitte, without pausing in his writing. "I want to speak to you."

The banker was a tall, spare, and rather austere-looking man about sixty years of age. His smoothly shaven face and suit of black broadcloth made him look very much like a magistrate, and all his clerks stood in great awe of him.

Robert, who had always been treated with exceptional kindness, was greatly surprised at this reception, but he took a seat and waited, still holding the bank-notes in his hand.

M. Labitte finished his letter, placed it in an envelope, wrote the address, and after laying it on top of a pile on the desk, said, turning to his secretary:

"So you have the money?"

"Here it is, sir."

"Where did you obtain it?"

"What do you mean?" stammered Robert.

"You certainly did not have it two hours ago, when you wrote to me asking permission to absent yourself to-day. Of whom did you borrow it?"

Robert turned very pale, and was about to protest when M. Labitte checked him by saying, coldly:

"Spare yourself the humiliation of telling a falsehood. I know that you lost the money I intrusted to you last night at the card-table. I even know where, and to whom you lost it."

"Who told you?" demanded Becherel quickly.

"That is not of the slightest consequence. I know it, and you can not deny it."

"Pardon me, sir. I did lose that amount, it is true, and the bank-notes that I lost were yours, but I had ten thousand francs of my own, and more, so I only risked my own money, as I was in a position to make the loss good this morning. And here is the money," he added, laying the notes on the desk.

"I can hardly believe that you only had to take the money out of one of your drawers," said the banker coldly. "I am perfectly well aware that you would have been able to repay the money sooner or later, but your only worldly possessions consist of real estate, in which your mother holds a life interest, for I do not believe that you have saved ten thousand francs out of the salary I give you.

Besides, if you really had the money on hand, as you pretend, you would not have written to me this morning, asking me to grant you leave of absence until to-morrow. You wanted to give yourself time to procure the money. You succeeded in doing this sooner than you expected, so here you are."

As he spoke the banker looked searchingly at Becherel, as if anxious to discern some sign of contrition, or, at least, of the embarrassment that precedes a confession in his countenance, but Robert, instead of blushing, met his gaze calmly, even haughtily. His pride stifled the voice of conscience, and he replied, carelessly:

"I have no reason to reproach myself. You intrusted ten thousand francs to me yesterday. I return the money to you this morning. What more can you ask?"

"Then you think that restitution will suffice to destroy the recollection of a breach of confidence?"

"Sir!" cried Robert, springing up in a furious passion.

"Yes, a breach of confidence," repeated M. Labitte. "I repeat the words, because I know no other name for the offense you have committed; and you must have very mistaken ideas in regard to honor if you think it enough to return the property of another person after you have appropriated it to your own use for a day, or even for an hour. Even if you spoke the truth when you said that you were in possession of a sum of money equal to that you had lost you would be none the less to blame for having betrayed a trust that should have been sacred to you. I would rather never have seen the money again than hear that you had used it at the card-table. So much the worse for you, young man, if you do not realize the gravity of such an offense. Remember there are not two codes of morals; there is but one. Was it your father who taught you the one you seem to believe?"

"I forbid you to speak of my father in this manner."

"Your father was my friend; and it is because he was

my friend that I have a right to remind you that he, too, would never look at these matters seriously, and that this unfortunate habit cost him dear. He died—partially ruined in purse, and—almost disgraced. I forgave him his faults, though they had cost me dear; but I tell you frankly that his death was most fortunate, for if he had lived much longer Heaven only knows how he would have ended. His example was one which you would do well to shun."

"Enough, sir."

"Will you be kind enough to hear me out? I have a word to say to you in relation to your mother. She is a saint: and she has suffered much. Have you thought of the fresh grief you are about to cause her? The letter I was finishing when you came in was to her. When she hears to-morrow that I have been obliged to dismiss you it will be the severest blow she has received since your father's death. Only a week ago I wrote her that I was very much pleased with you; now I am obliged to announce a misfortune for which I was as utterly unprepared as she can possibly be."

This allusion to his mother touched Robert deeply, and his eyes filled with tears; but his wounded pride soon regained its ascendancy, and conquering his emotion he said, dryly:

"You dismiss me, then? You have no further use for me?" he added, gazing at M. Labitte with a defiant air.

"You leave me no alternative; besides, I feel convinced that what I am doing is for your own good. I do not underestimate your good qualities. I have had plenty of time to recognize and appreciate them during the past year, and I do ample justice to your intelligence and activity. But you turn from the path of rectitude at the very first opportunity that presents itself. Other opportunities will be offered, and you will again yield to temptation; so I think it will be best for you to give up a position in which you will constantly be exposed to new temptations. Choose a

profession in which you will never have any financial responsibility. It will be your only salvation. I wish you success, and I will assist you if I can."

"Thanks!" said Robert, ironically. "Our acquaintance, however, had better cease here and now; but I should like to know what you wrote to my mother."

"I wrote her that you had been gambling, and that I could not keep you in my employ any longer. I refrained from adding that you had lost money that did not belong to you. I should not have told her that even if you had not returned the money. My decision is irrevocable, however."

"I shall not make any attempt to change it, I assure you. The only thing left for me now is to ask you once more to whom I am indebted for a dismissal for which I shall have very little trouble in consoling myself, however?"

"I am under no obligation to give you the name of my informant; and I am surprised that you should try to wound one who has certainly proved himself a friend, by such bitter words. All I have to say is that if you were more familiar with Paris and Parisian life you would know that the house where you met with this mishap is one of those where thoughtless gossip is quite the order of the day. It is frequented by all sorts of people who do not consider themselves under the slightest obligation to keep what happens there a secret. The merest chance brought to my office this morning a person who met you there last night, and who told me nothing but the truth, as you yourself have been obliged to admit. We had better let the subject drop now, I think. You can rely upon my keeping the affair a secret. Your mother alone will know what has occurred. There will be nothing to prevent you from giving your friends to understand that you left me of your own accord."

A cold bow from the banker terminated the interview.

Robert scarcely deigned to return it, and left the office without another word.

But once out of his former employer's sight, all his pretended indifference vanished; and he left the building crushed and stunned, like a man who had just received a severe blow on the head. He staggered as he descended the steps, and when he reached the street he walked aimlessly on without even knowing where he was going. The shock was the more severe from the fact that he received it just as he was rejoicing over his miraculous escape from the embarrassing position into which his imprudence had plunged him.

To his credit be it said, however, that he was less troubled about the loss of his situation than the grief his mother would experience on receiving M. Labitte's letter.

"I, too, will write to my mother," he murmured, "and tell her that this man is a cold and unfeeling creature who is pleased to consider a mere peccadillo a heinous crime. I will tell her that the whole difficulty can be adjusted by raising, by means of a mortgage, a sum of money that will make no appreciable difference in our fortune, and that I can easily find another situation in place of the one I have lost. Colonel Mornac, who knows almost everybody in Paris, will cheerfully find me one, I am sure. My mother, who knows him, will feel reassured when she hears that I have met him and that he still takes an interest in me. Nevertheless, I would give all the ready money I have left to know the name of the scoundrel who denounced me. I haven't the slightest idea who it could have been. The *habitués* of Madame de Malvoisine's house are not business men, and would not be likely to have any dealings with Labitte. But now I think of it, Galimas is a stock-broker, and stock-brokers often visit banking-houses to solicit orders. Galimas must have learned through Gustave that I was Labitte's private secretary, so he hurried to the bank this morning to regale my employer with the history of my

escapade. I have an old score to settle with him, and he shall settle with me for this at the same time. I will insult him in the presence of the whole Stock Exchange. Gustave offered to take me there after breakfast, and I intend to accept the invitation. After I have given Galimas a lesson I will go down to Rennes and spend a month with my mother to console her."

When he reached the corner of the Rue du Faubourg Poissonnière, where he lived, he recollected that the hour of his appointment with Gustave was eleven o'clock, and as it lacked only a few minutes of that time he turned his steps in the direction of the Bourse instead of returning home to write to his mother as he had previously intended.

"It will answer every purpose if my letter is mailed by five o'clock," he thought; "and it is of the utmost importance for me to see Gustave this morning, not only to tell him what has happened, but to remind him that he promised to serve as my second against the scoundrel who has not only insulted me but acted the part of a cowardly informer."

The clock was just striking eleven when he reached the door of the restaurant where he was to meet his friend. There was quite a crowd in the square already, and he had considerable difficulty in crossing the street on account of the numerous carriages that were flying about in every direction.

There was almost as much bustle and confusion in the restaurant as in the square. Every table was occupied; and he was obliged to exercise considerable skill and patience to reach that at which Gustave was just finishing a dozen oysters.

"I began without you," he remarked; "but I have ordered cutlets and eggs fried with truffles for two, and here are your oysters. Sit down and begin your breakfast. We've no time to lose."

"Why are you in such a hurry?"

"To-morrow is liquidation day; and the day is likely to be an exciting one, especially as there are all sorts of rumors afloat. But that is neither here nor there. Did you have a satisfactory interview with Cash on Delivery?"

"Yes; he seemed to be expecting me; and the interview was not a long one. After a conversation of about a quarter of an hour he gave me the ten thousand francs."

"I prophesied as much, you recollect. He's a very pleasant sort of a fellow to deal with, don't you think so?"

"Oh, yes; very pleasant," replied Becherel. "So pleasant, in fact, that I don't altogether trust him."

"And why?" inquired Gustave.

"Because no one ever saw a usurer before who was ready and willing to loan so large a sum of money to a person he knew nothing about."

"You forget I had told him all about you before you went there. He knew that you belonged to a highly respectable family, and that you were the possessor of quite a snug little fortune, which your mother shares with you now, but which will be all your own some day. And then your name had its effect with him, as with everybody else."

"My name! One would suppose I was a direct descendant of the dukes of Brittany to hear you talk. We belong to a respectable old country family, that is all."

"But that is quite enough for people who would be loath to mention their grandfather's calling. It is very evident that you know nothing about these *parvenues*. Marcaudier's father was a waiter in a restaurant; and that accounts for his weakness for persons with a title or even a *de* before their names."

"Are Madame de Malvoisine and Mademoiselle des Andrieux *parvenues* too?" inquired Robert, ironically.

"I shouldn't wonder," replied Gustave laughing. "I certainly should not be willing to guarantee that their ancestors figured among the Crusaders."

"Nor that the fair Herminia is not the daughter of the countess who passes her off as her ward, eh?"

"What! you know that?"

"An old friend of my father's, who was there last evening, told me so."

"Then it is useless to try to conceal it from you. Herminia is an illegitimate child; but she will have a dowry large enough to make up for that; but I repeat that you could hardly do better than to marry her."

"Marcaudier made the same remark to me. There seems to be a sort of conspiracy in all this. But I warn you that it will prove a failure. Such a marriage would not suit me at all."

"Oh, well, don't get angry. No one has any intention of compelling you to marry the girl against your will."

"I presume not; so suppose we change the subject. Do you know what has befallen me?"

"No, upon my word, I do not."

"Labitte has just dismissed me as he would dismiss a servant, and even more summarily, for he didn't even give me a week's notice."

"And why?"

"Because the scoundrel who won all your money last night at écarté went to him this morning and told him that I lost ten thousand francs at cards last night."

"Galimas? the rascal!"

"Yes, my friend, the scoundrel denounced me. I am almost sure of it. I hope you will not take his part now as you did after our quarrel at the card-table last evening; and I warn you that on leaving here I intend to go straight to the Bourse for the express purpose of boxing his ears."

"That will be pretty rough treatment; but he certainly deserves it—that is, unless he was actuated by no malicious motive in disclosing what he did. He could have had no suspicion that the money you handed me at the beginning of the game belonged to your employer, and on dropping

into Labitte's office for orders, as he is in the habit of doing every morning, he must have thoughtlessly let the cat out of the bag."

"There you are trying to excuse him again! You had better be trying to excuse yourself for not having told me that the fellow knew Labitte."

"I did very wrong, I admit."

The conversation ceased for awhile. Robert was thinking of the vengeance he was determined to wreak upon Galimas; and Gustave too seemed to be deeply absorbed in thought—a very unusual thing for him.

"Listen," resumed Gustave after quite a long silence, "Galimas has acted infamously. I am going to pay him the ten thousand francs I owe him, and then I intend to tell him exactly what I think of his conduct. He will find that he has two duels on hand instead of one. But now let us talk over your plans. What are you going to do now you have lost your situation?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. If nothing better offers I shall return to Rennes."

"I should call that a last resort. How would you like to remain in Paris, and go into a business that would yield you from one to two thousand francs a month to begin with?"

"Don't try to make fun of me. I am in no jesting mood, I assure you."

"I am not jesting. If you will go into partnership with me, I'll guarantee you at least that much."

"Become a speculator? Never! In the first place, I know nothing in the world about stocks."

"What did you do at Labitte's?"

"I had charge of his correspondence. He never sent me to the Bourse. He promised my mother he would not—"

"Ah! so you are afraid of displeasing your mother!"

"I am my own master, but I repeat that I have no taste

and no talent for the business you propose to me. Besides, I know nothing at all about it."

"I will teach you, and in five or six lessons you will know more than I do."

"Thanks, but I am sure it is not my vocation," replied Robert, brusquely, "so we had better say no more about it. Tell me instead, what occurred at Madame de Malvoisine's after my departure. Did that young lady—Mademoiselle Violette—remain in the drawing-room until the close of the evening?"

"So you are still thinking about that young lady, are you?" cried Gustave. "Ah, well, she left the drawing-room shortly after you did, and later in the evening the countess told me that she had dismissed her. Mademoiselle Violette consequently finds herself without a situation; and you two certainly ought to sympathize with each other. But you need feel no uneasiness about her. She will have no trouble about finding another, for she has great musical talent. She might do much better for herself pecuniarily, if she chose, for Galimas would be only too glad to lavish his money upon her."

"That man again! Can it be that you have sworn to exasperate me beyond endurance?" cried Robert, striking the table with his clinched fist.

"Don't fly into a passion, my dear fellow. Mademoiselle Violette is quite capable of taking care of herself. Galimas will have his labor for his pains. Besides, you can protect her if necessary. Though if you have any intention of doing that you had better try to make a little money. Money is power, you know, and I am going to put you in the way to make some to-day."

"Much obliged, but I don't want to run any risk of losing, and with my experience of last night still fresh in my mind—"

"Oh! I'm not going to associate you with me in my speculations unless I have a sure thing of it. Do you see

that tall man who is coming toward us? Ah, well! let me have about three minutes conversation with him, and I shall then know exactly what to depend upon."

Gustave rose, shook hands with the new-comer, took him off behind a large flowering shrub planted in a box a few yards from the table, and began a confidential conversation with him.

This new-comer was a light-complexioned, tolerably good-looking man, whose costume was one of studied elegance. At the first glance one might have taken him for a man of rank and culture, but on looking at him more attentively Robert perceived that he had a treacherous eye and a crafty face. After a few minutes he walked away, and Gustave rushed back to the table.

"Make haste and drink your coffee. You can finish your cigar under the colonnade. Time is money this morning."

"Why?"

"You will see presently. Waiter, bring the bill."

As his friend made his way toward the door, Robert, who was following him closely, saw several men with hooked noses and a Hebrew cast of countenance endeavor to speak to him, but Gustave, without even pausing, waved them aside with a gesture that said more plainly than any words: "I have nothing to tell you."

"Do they take you for an oracle?" asked Becherel.

"For a sub-oracle, and they are not far from right. I have just heard a valuable piece of news, and I intend to keep it to myself. By the time they hear it my game will be won."

"So you intend to speculate to-day?"

"What a question! Do you suppose I am going to enter that building merely to contemplate the frescoes that adorn the ceiling?"

Becherel said no more, but allowed himself to be dragged toward the Grecian temple where the devotees of Mammon

worship with such frenzied devotion. A long line of carriages bordered the sidewalk, and others were constantly driving up with speculators and brokers, who hardly waited for the horse to stop before leaping to the ground, for the hour for opening the Bourse had come, and the sound of excited voices could already be heard. The belated ones were mounting the steps, three at a time, and the peristyle and colonnades were already thronged.

Everybody was running wildly about, shouting and gesticulating frantically.

"I never visited a lunatic asylum," thought Becherel, "but I fancy that the inmates of one do not appear as demented and boisterous as these gentlemen."

Gustave did not allow him much time for reflection, however.

"Come with me," he cried, darting up the steps, "and whatever I say or do, maintain a prudent silence. I ask only one favor of you, and that is to keep your mouth shut."

On reaching the colonnade he turned to the left, and led Becherel to the place where the north gallery intersects the grand staircase.

"Remain here and you will see an exciting spectacle," he remarked.

"But I came here to box Galimas's ears, not to watch the brokers."

"You can do that by and by, and I will help you—after I've finished the little business transaction we have on hand."

"*You* have on hand, you mean. I don't want to have anything to do with it."

Gustave did not wait to hear the end of the protest, but darted into the crowd, where he was immediately surrounded by a dozen excited men, from whom he finally succeeded in making his escape, though not without a desperate struggle.

Several young men rushed by Robert, note-book in hand, to give the prices of the various stocks to their clients under the colonnade, soon returning to again plunge into the fiery furnace, which must be in full blast, judging from the noise it made. Soon this handsome and rather distinguished-looking young gentleman attracted their attention, and they paused for a second as they passed, to enlighten him, too, in regard to prices, by thrusting their note-books under his nose, a courtesy which Robert felt obliged to acknowledge by a "Thanks, monsieur," that seemed to surprise them very much, not being accustomed to such politeness.

"They take me for a speculator, that is evident," thought Becherel. "I've a great mind to get out of here. But no, I can't go until I have seen Gustave again, that is, unless Galimas should happen to pass."

So he resolved to wait as patiently as he could, and accordingly made an attempt to divert his mind by listening to the conversation that was going on around him, though much of it was more unintelligible than Greek to him.

"How are they selling now?" he heard one man ask.

"They are falling rapidly. 82¼ were the last figures."

"And they opened at 83. That is a sharp decline."

"What is the cause of it?"

"Bad news from Tonquin."

"Is the news official?"

"It hasn't been published yet, but big Gustave is always well posted. He has a friend of the minister of war at his elbow. He has just sold three hundred thousand francs' worth."

"He must be sure of the fact then. He is too shrewd to be caught. But he must have somebody to back him; he hasn't credit enough for transactions of that magnitude."

Things went on in this way for at least twenty minutes, and Robert, in his bewilderment, began to wonder if his

friend had gone mad. He finally concluded that it would be advisable to make some further inquiries, and seeing a rather pleasant-faced young broker standing alone a few steps from him, he stepped up to him, and touching his hat politely, inquired:

"Can you tell me what all this means, sir?"

"Certainly, sir. Government securities are going down because Monsieur de Bismarck is selling."

"What, sir?"

"You see that big man over there with a red nose and mutton-chop whiskers. Well, he is Prince Bismarck's private secretary, and he has been sent here by his master for the express purpose of unloading his stock."

Robert perceived now that the young man was making open fun of him. He turned pale with anger, and was about to answer him in kind, when another broker rushed up, and seizing his facetious friend by the collar, exclaimed:

"What are you doing here? Canler is looking for you everywhere. The news from Tonquin was only a *canard*. Rentes are going up again like mad. In less than five minutes they will be above the opening price. They are selling at 82½ already."

They both rushed off, and were out of sight and hearing before Becherel could find the stinging retort with which he proposed to annihilate the impertinent young man to whom he had applied for information.

"I must look like a greenhorn," he muttered, savagely. "If I ever see that fellow again I'll pay him for his impertinence. What a rude, unmannerly set these brokers are. I'm not used to associating with such people, and I certainly am not going to begin now."

And he was about taking his departure when he saw Gustave rushing toward him, puffing and panting.

"So you've come at last!" exclaimed Becherel. "I was just going. What were you thinking of to leave me here?

Will you do me the favor to tell me why you insisted upon bringing me here?"

"To make some money for you, you great simpleton," replied Gustave, dragging his friend out of the crowd. "Our little scheme proved a success."

"What little scheme?"

"On reaching the Bourse we sold three hundred thousand francs worth of rentes at the rate of eighty-two francs seventy-five centimes, and we just repurchased them at the rate of eighty-two francs twenty-five centimes."

"I don't understand you."

"What! you don't understand that we make a profit of fifty centimes a share by the operation—an aggregate of one hundred and fifty thousand francs—less commission!"

"You must be jesting. In the first place, I did not authorize you to embark in any speculation on my account; besides, if I had lost such an amount I should not have been able to pay it: so it is impossible for me to accept any share of the profits. It would not be honest in me, and I absolutely refuse to do so."

"You refuse!" exclaimed Gustave. "What an absurd and unreasonable creature you are. I bring you a snug little fortune almost, and you turn up your nose at it. It is ridiculous in you. I'll set your mind at rest, my dear fellow, for you must understand that if it had not been for you I shouldn't have been able to manipulate three hundred thousand francs worth of securities. I made use of your name and your credit in the transaction."

"My credit? You must be crazy."

"No, listen, and I'll explain how I managed it. I have a friend who is in a position to get hold of trustworthy information—or what passes for such—the tall, light-complexioned fellow you saw in the restaurant, and it is enough for him to be seen talking with me for people to suppose that he has just confided a government secret to me. As I wanted to speculate a little on my own account to-day,

and didn't have credit enough, I took your name, and Monsieur de Becherel, a wealthy real estate owner in Brittany has figured quite extensively here to-day, through my agency of course. A broker who has great confidence in me bought and sold the stocks for me without asking me any questions, and we repurchased just one minute before the official dispatch denying the news of the disaster in Tonquin was affixed to the bulletin board, and now you have only to accompany me to the office of our broker on the fourth day of next month to receive the one hundred and fifty thousand francs we have cleared by the operation. I shall have to give one half of the amount to the person who gave me the information, and we will divide the rest, so there'll be about thirty-five thousand francs apiece for us. What do you say to that? Wasn't I right when I told you that the business was a good one?"

"I don't know what you think about it, but I consider the circulation of false reports for the purpose of influencing the market nothing more or less than a swindle, and as I said before, I absolutely refuse to profit by it."

"You can do as you please about that, of course, but I hope you won't refuse to go and draw the money. I can't get it if you don't, for the transaction was conducted in your name. You needn't take any of the money of course, unless you choose to do so, but you will have to sign the receipt. You surely won't make me lose the money I've made."

"Very well, I will draw it for you, but I shall tell the broker how I happened to be mixed up in the affair."

"That would be even worse, for you would ruin my credit completely. If it should become known that I had operated in your name, without your knowledge or consent, I should never find another firm that would be willing to fill an order for me. There would be nothing left for me but to jump into the Seine, and you would be the cause of my death. A nice way of thanking me for putting thirty-five thousand francs in your pocket."

"I won't take the money, I tell you."

"Of course you will do exactly as you please about that. I only venture to remind you that it is three times the amount you lost last night at Madame de Malvoisine's, and that it will come in very conveniently, now you have lost your situation. So far as your scruples are concerned, I must say that they are utterly absurd. Do you suppose that even the virtuous Labitte would refuse to profit by any information that came in his way? I'll warrant that if he had known what my friend just told me, he would have sold securities by the armful and made his millions—instead of thousands—for he operates on a colossal scale. Don't be a child. Look at life as it really is, a perpetual struggle in which all that is not forbidden is permissible. This morning before breakfast you were groaning about your debts, and talking of going back to Rennes to bury yourself there, and deploring your inability to render the charming Violette some assistance. The wheel of fortune has turned for you now. You are the possessor of a snug little sum: there is nothing to compel you to leave Paris or to prevent you from coming to the aid of your new divinity. Money is the sinews of war, in love as in everything else."

"Enough. If I decide to take the money it will only be to repay Marcaudier. As for Galimas—"

"I had no idea that you were such a man to bear malice. I, when I have such a run of good luck, feel like forgiving all my enemies. I just saw Galimas. He scarcely had time to take the ten thousand francs I owed him. He wasn't as well posted as I was, and was caught. He's been losing money like fury, and—"

"I hope he'll be ruined."

"What a hard-hearted creature you are! I don't think there's any danger of his being ruined, but you can rest assured that he'll lose a good round sum, and in that case he'll have something else to do than run after Mademoiselle

Violette. But I can't waste any more time talking to you. I must go back and see what they're doing in there. If you'll take my advice you'll let Galimas alone. He's forgotten all about you and the seconds you were to send him, and if he did tell Labitte, which I am strongly inclined to doubt, he did you a service, though unwittingly, as you are now on the road to fortune. You'll receive a statement from our broker to-morrow, and I hope that I've succeeded in converting you to more sensible notions and that you will cease to spurn the favors Fate has bestowed upon you. *Au revoir.*"

Robert, once more left alone, asked himself if he had not been dreaming. He could not accustom himself to the idea that his situation had just been entirely changed by the stroke of a fairy's wand, and that he owed this miracle to the burly fellow whom chance had thrown in his path only the evening before.

He could not yet congratulate himself upon having met Gustave, but he was less firmly resolved to refuse his share of the ill-acquired gains. He said to himself that with this money he should be able to pay the debt that weighed so heavily upon him, and without being obliged to grieve his mother by mortgaging their property.

In the meantime he must write to his mother, and if he wished his letter to reach her at the same time as that of M. Labitte he had no time to lose, so he hastened to his lodgings.

On arriving there, he found a letter that had been left during his absence. The handwriting was unknown to him, but on carelessly breaking the seal, he was not a little surprised to see these lines:

"I must have a few minutes conversation with you. If you feel any interest in my welfare, meet me at two o'clock to-morrow on the terrace near the orangery.

"VIOLETTE."

CHAPTER III.

The month of February was drawing to a close, and the near approach of spring was apparent. The sun was shining brightly from a cloudless sky, and departing winter seemed to be trying to atone for her past severity by granting the Parisians a warm and serene day.

More delightful weather for a promenade could hardly be imagined, and the privileged persons who were not chained to the desk or work-shop by stern necessity, were crowding the streets, and the Champs Elysées was thronged with equipages on their way to the Bois.

At a quarter of two o'clock, Robert de Becherel entered the garden of the Tuileries, and walked rapidly toward the Orangery.

After writing to his mother he had spent the rest of the evening before in reviewing the events of that day and of the preceding night.

He was still undecided as to the course he would pursue. The wisest thing for him to do probably, was to return to Rennes, and allow Gustave to get out of the scrape as best he could: but the other course had its attractions. To remain in Paris, and acquire a competence there through the acquaintance and advice of this Gustave who knew how to make seventy thousand francs in twenty minutes, was certainly a very tempting prospect to a secretary who was out of employment, especially as he said to himself that he might be able to make money honestly and without resorting to such trickery as his friend had used that morning.

At all events, he could not leave the city without seeing the fair young girl who had made such a favorable impression upon him, and who now asked his aid and advice with such flattering frankness. He accordingly resolved to de-

fer his final decision until after this interview, and also until after he had stated his case to Colonel Mornac.

Upon the long terrace that overlooks the Place de la Concorde, there were only a few nurses and children, and two or three old men who had come there to sun themselves, for the spot is but little frequented except in summer, though it commands a magnificent view of the Seine and of the Trocadero and the hills of Meudon in the distance.

Robert hastened on, without pausing to admire it, however, for he had but one thought, to discover the young girl of whom he as yet saw no sign, and he feared he had arrived too late.

He caught sight of her at last, as he passed the corner of the Orangery. She was coming straight toward him, and he thought her even more charming than the evening before. In the drawing-room on the Rue du Rocher he could judge only of her face, and one really judges of a woman's charms only after one has seen her walking in broad daylight. Many women who are beautiful, seated, and seen by gas-light, lose greatly when subjected to this test, but Mlle. Violette was a gainer by it. Her figure was perfect, her gait at once easy and graceful, and there was a perfect harmony, not only of proportions, but of movements.

She was not very tall, nor was she the fraction of an inch too short; and she was dressed very simply though tastefully, for the neatly fitting black dress she wore enhanced the fairness of her skin, the brilliancy of her large dark eyes, and the rich gold of her tresses.

She did not seem at all embarrassed as she extended a little daintily gloved hand to Robert, and said:

"I thank you for coming. I felt sure that you would, I admit, and I am glad to see that I judged you correctly."

"And I, mademoiselle," replied Robert, smiling, "am proud to have inspired sufficient confidence for you not to feel afraid to apply to me in this hour of trouble."

"What could I possibly have to fear? We have exchanged only a few words, it is true, but I flatter myself that we understand each other. Besides, at the very beginning of our acquaintance, I made known the conditions upon which a continuation of it depended, and you accepted them."

"It cost me quite a sacrifice to do it, but I can not deny that I promised not to make love to you."

"That is all I ask."

"But I did not promise not to love you."

"Ah, well, love me with a frank and cordial affection, then. You will perhaps declare that such a feeling can exist only between persons of the same sex, but I hope to convince you to the contrary."

"I will try to oblige you, but I can not vouch for my success."

"I will undertake your conversion at my own risk, but I warn you that at the very first violation of the compact I shall instantly terminate our friendly relations, highly as I value them."

"You value them no more highly than I do, since I am glad to accept even the meager and unsatisfactory ones you offer me."

"Is the assurance of mutual esteem and sincere sympathy in all the trials of life nothing? You may reply that our situations are not identical, and that all the advantages are on my side, as you are rich and—"

"Less rich than you suppose, mademoiselle," interrupted Becherel. "My financial condition is not all that could be desired, by any means, and I have just lost the situation upon which I am partially dependent for support."

"Is this really true?" exclaimed the young girl. "And I have sent for you to tell you about my own troubles! Pray do not waste your time and thought upon me. I shall be able to get out of the difficulty somehow. Think of yourself, sir, and forget that I am in trouble."

This was said with such earnestness, and in a tone of such sincerity that it dispelled the suspicion that had arisen in Robert's mind. She had said: "You are rich," and he had fancied that this was the preamble to an appeal to his purse, but he now regretted the injustice he had done her, and replied, cheerfully:

"Oh, my troubles are as nothing in comparison with yours. My mother has some property, and I—"

"Your mother! oh, sir, if you are in trouble, go to her without delay. If I was so fortunate as to have a mother it is with her that I would take refuge in a time like this."

"Yes, I know that you are an orphan."

"Who told you so?"

"An old friend of my father, whom I met at Madame de Malvoisines night before last."

"You mean Colonel Mornac, do you not?"

"Do you know him?"

"I have frequently met him in Madame de Malvoisine's salon, and he has always been particularly kind to me."

"He spoke of you in the highest terms, and gave me to understand that there was some mystery connected with your past life. If I dared I would ask you—"

"To tell you my story? If I did you would be the only person to whom I have confided all—"

"I should certainly be deeply touched by such a proof of confidence on your part."

The girl hesitated.

"So be it," she said, after a long silence. "When you know my history I shall feel less unwillingness to ask the favor I desire of you, for my past will explain my present situation. I warn you that my story will be a long one, and if you wish to hear it we had better take a seat on that bench yonder."

"Very well; I am listening, mademoiselle," remarked Robert, who needed no urging to induce him to seat himself beside the young girl.

"Then I will begin, but I warn you that I shall be obliged to go very far back, even to the days of my infancy."

"Those days can hardly date back to the Dark Ages," interrupted Robert, gayly. "You are barely nineteen years of age I am sure."

"Possibly twenty—possibly eighteen. I do not know my exact age, nor do I know the place of my birth, the name of my parents, or even my Christian name."

"Then that of Violette—"

"Is only a surname that was given me for reasons I will explain presently, but pray do not interrupt me again. The first in my series of recollections is that of a very insignificant fact. I must have been about three years old when a woman, my nurse, probably, carried me out upon a sort of terrace surrounded with water."

"A terrace surrounded with water! It must have been a pier or jetty."

"So people have told me since, and I think they are right. There was a crowd on this pier, and I was looking around me when suddenly an enormous dark object passed by me—a huge black mass that looked like a moving house."

"It was a ship coming into port probably."

"Yes, but into what port? That is something I never knew, and never shall know probably."

"Why not? I feel sure that I could find this town, and that you would recognize it if I took you there."

"Perhaps so, but that day I was terribly frightened, and uttered such shrieks that my nurse was obliged to take me away. An incident like that makes an indelible impression upon a child's mind, while other much more important events leave no trace upon it. I should perhaps recognize the place where I wept, but I should not know the town. I have no recollection of it whatever."

"But you must remember your parents—at least your mother."

"Very vaguely. I sometimes see, in fancy, the face of a lady who embraced me tenderly, and whose voice was as sweet as the sweetest music. I remember, too, that this lady—who must have been my mother—often repeated a word which I have never been able to recall, but which I think must have been my name."

"Have you ever looked over a list of names to see if you could find it there?"

"Yes, but without success."

"Do you recollect nothing about the house in which you lived?"

"It seems to me that this house was large, and that there was a garden with flowers and gravel walks connected with it, but that is all I can remember."

"If you were only three years old at the time this is not to be wondered at. But afterward, when your mind developed and you became able to talk and listen and reason, you must have had a much clearer idea of your situation, and so retained a more distinct recollection of the persons and things that surrounded you."

"One would suppose so, but for some time after the event I speak of my life seems to have been a perfect blank. Sometimes I am almost inclined to believe that I slept for two or three days, for I can recollect nothing more until I found myself in the orphan asylum at Rennes, your native town."

"That is strange. You were born in a seaport, and Rennes is an inland town. Some one must have taken you there."

"Yes; but how or why I am unable to say. I was picked up one summer morning at the end of the Promenade du Thabor, where I had spent the night asleep on a bench. I could not speak distinctly, though I seemed to be at least four years old, and people at first supposed I was an idiot. There was no scrap of paper or clew to my identity about me, but I was well dressed, and I were very

fine linen, from which the mark had been removed, however. From this fact it was generally supposed that my parents were wealthy, and that they had purposely abandoned me."

"Was no attempt made to find these inhuman parents?" exclaimed Robert.

"Yes: but these efforts proving futile, I was placed in an orphan asylum, where I was taught first to talk, and afterward to read, write, sew and embroider. I was learning the dress-maker's trade, at which I was fast becoming an adept, when the directress of the institution discovered that I had a decided talent for music, and a very good voice, so I was made to sing in the church where we attended service. It soon became rumored that one of the children of the Home was a musical prodigy, so the Mother Superior of the Convent of the Visitation came to hear me sing. She expressed herself much pleased, and offered to take charge of my education. I eagerly availed myself of the opportunity thus afforded, and the happiest days of my life were spent with the sisterhood."

"Why did you leave the convent?"

"I had no intention of leaving it, for I was leading a tranquil, pleasant life there, untroubled by any anxiety in regard to the future, when one day, about three years ago, the mother superior asked me if I intended to take the veil when I became old enough. I had a profound respect and love for religion, but I did not feel that the life of a nun was really my vocation, and I frankly told her so. She praised my sincerity, but said that the sisters could not keep me any longer unless I intended to enter upon a religious life, and that I must choose a way of earning a livelihood. There was nothing I could do but become a governess, or give lessons in music and singing, and as a very respectable lady who kept a boarding-school at Saint Maude had just written to the superior asking if there was among her pupils any one she could recommend to fill the position of assist-

ant music teacher in the school, the situation was offered to me, and there was nothing for me to do but accept it, for I was obliged to leave the convent, and what would become of me, alone in the world, without relatives, influential friends, or money? So I went to Saint Maude, where I was very graciously received by Madame Valbert. She took a great fancy to me, and I was very much pleased with her, so I immediately entered upon my duties. I remained in the institution a year."

"And left it to enter Madame de Malvoisine's employ."

"Yes, very unfortunately, and I will tell you how it happened. I had become accustomed to my new life, which was much more gay than at the convent. Madame Valbert was very kind, and my pupils seemed to be exceedingly fond of me, and I must do them the justice to say that they never tried to humiliate me by alluding to my unfortunate past."

"Perhaps they were ignorant of it."

"That is true. They were ignorant of it, though Madame Valbert was not. She kept my secret, and I ought to feel grateful to her for it, though if Madame de Malvoisine had known the truth I should still be at Saint Maude. On certain days—her birthday for example—Madame Valbert was in the habit of giving entertainments and *musicales*, to which not only the parents of the scholars, but former pupils, were invited. Herminia des Andrieux had left the school two years before I entered it, but she always attended these reunions, chaperoned by Madame de Malvoisine, and they never heard me sing without quite overpowering me with compliments. I did not fancy the countess very much, but I rather liked Herminia. She is really not bad at heart, her worst fault being her vanity; besides, I did not know her then as well as I have since learned to know her."

"So you unfortunately consented to enter the house on the Rue du Rocher?"

"Certainly, though had I known more of the company

that frequented it, and foreseen my brutal dismissal, I should not have accepted Madame de Malvoisine's offer, liberal as it was, for she offered me my board and a salary of four hundred francs a month. I was to take my meals at her house, and lodge in a room rented and furnished at her expense. She also gave Madame Valbert to understand that I stood a very good chance of finding a husband among the gentlemen who frequented her salon, and that lady strongly advised me not to refuse a situation that seemed in every way desirable. We both made a great mistake, however, in not ascertaining exactly what would be required of me. Madame de Malvoisine gave us to understand that her daughter needed a companion to assist her in completing her musical education. I was fully competent to do this, as I had had excellent masters at Rennes, and had worked very hard. I did not suspect for an instant that she had engaged me with the expectation that I would make myself generally useful in the household."

"What! that woman dared to make a servant of you!"

"Oh, not at least, not apparently. I was treated to all appearance as an equal, but if you only knew what was expected of me! I had not a moment that I could call my own. I was obliged to be at the house by nine o'clock and wait until it suited Herminia to come and take a singing lesson. After breakfast, at which Madame de Malvoisine seldom made her appearance, I was expected to remain at the disposal of the ladies, and if they had no shopping or errands to be done they made me read to them —and such reading! All this was nothing, of course, and a poor girl like myself ought not to complain of the tasks imposed upon her. I was paid for performing them, but the evenings—"

"How intolerable they must have been to you!"

"Yes; I suffered more than you can possibly imagine. At first I was hardly competent to judge of the characters

of the persons who frequented Madame de Malvoisine's drawing-room, for all I knew about life was from the little I had seen of it in a convent, and in a young ladies' boarding-school; but it seemed to me that there must be circles in which one met better-bred men and less vapid women. One evening, a few words uttered by Monsieur de Mornac, who seemed to take a friendly interest in me, opened my eyes, and I perceived that I had made a great mistake. About the same time it happened, too, that some of the gentlemen began to pay me too much attention to please Madame de Malvoisine. I certainly did not encourage them, but I could not be forgiven for unintentionally attracting their notice. The reason of all this was apparent. Herminia was anxious to marry, and any gentlemen who do not pay court to her are not welcome in the countess's drawing-room."

"I must be in dire disgrace then," remarked Becherel, smiling.

"Less so than you suppose. Herminia is now and will be, very wealthy, so she is not looking for money, but for a name—and yours suits her. You please her too, in other respects, so you may expect to receive a pressing invitation to honor Madame de Malvoisine's house with your presence on any and all occasions."

"She can invite me if she likes, but I shall never accept the invitation."

"You are at liberty to do as you please about that, of course, but let me finish my sad story. It was not until about a year ago that my position became absolutely intolerable. Madame Valbert inquired about me from time to time, and the countess, who could find no just cause of complaint against me, dared not dismiss me without a cause, so she decided upon another way of getting rid of me. She tried to marry me to a gentleman of her acquaintance who was willing to take me without a dowry; but the gentleman had excited my intense aversion from

the very first, and I declined the honor he thought he conferred upon me. From that day I was the victim of Madame de Malvoisine's continual displeasure, and Herminia never attempted to take my part. I was now reduced to the humiliating position of a hireling. I continued to appear in the drawing-room, it is true; but I was forbidden to take any part in the conversation, and was expected to play almost constantly, sometimes until as late as three o'clock in the morning."

"I wonder that you endured this life as long as you did."

"I had resolved to make a change, and was only waiting for an opportunity. That has presented itself, and I leave Madame de Malvoisine without the slightest regret. There is but one thing that troubles me. That is a fear lest she should slander me to Madame Valbert, and I prize the good opinion of my former employer too highly to be willing to lose it."

"And you are sure that Madame de Malvoisine did not know your story?"

"Perfectly sure. You doubt it, probably, because you wonder that the countess would take any young girl without a family name into her household. But I had one that was manufactured for me in Rennes. I forgot to tell you that I was baptized at the orphan asylum. The directress was my godmother, and I was named Marie Thabor, from the walk on which I was found. Afterward I was called Violette, from my intense love for the flower of that name, and the surname clung to me. Madame de Malvoisine fancied it, and never called me by any other name. She never made any inquiries about my parents; she thinks they are dead, and it is more than probable that she is right. But the time has now come for me to tell you the favor I desire of you; but first I want to enlighten you in regard to the state of my finances. If I were in pecuniary distress I

should not have applied to you. I am too proud to ask alms of any one. But I am not in need of money. My stay with Madame de Malvoisine was an advantage inasmuch as it enabled me to save the greater part of my earnings. I have not spent more than one fourth of my salary during the past two years; besides, my room rent is paid for six months to come. She was certainly very generous to me in these matters, and the injustice she has done me will never make me forget her benefits. I have enough to live on for at least eighteen months, and in that time I certainly ought to be able to better my condition—I certainly intend to try."

"You will succeed, I am sure; but in Paris it is a very difficult matter for a young girl to earn an honest livelihood, and—"

"You will perhaps think me very presumptuous, but I have been told so often that I possess remarkable talents, both as a pianist and singer, that I have really come to believe it, and I would like to put this talent to some practical use."

"In giving concerts? Your success would be certain, but I doubt if you would derive much pecuniary benefit from this success."

"I, too, doubt it, so I am thinking of something else."

"Of the stage, perhaps?"

"Yes, of the stage," replied Violette, promptly.

Robert's face clouded.

"I can see that you do not approve of the plan, and I foresee the objections you are going to make. You think that I shall be rushing to my ruin. I am aware that it is a dangerous career, but I realize the danger, and am not afraid to confront it if I can find a friend to sustain me, a friend who will encourage me and aid me with his advice. I am not wanting in energy, but I lack experience, and I must have that of a friend to rely upon. You have offered to be this friend—"

"And I will keep that promise: but, alas! I do not know much more about the career upon which you wish to enter than you do. I see the dangers, as every one sees them, and as you yourself see them, but I do not know how I can help you to avoid them."

"You fail to understand my meaning. I thought that through you I might be brought into communication with some theatrical manager. Colonel Mornac knows them all. He told me so, and I might have applied directly to him, but I did not dare. Do you blame me for thinking that you would perhaps consent to act as an intermediary between him and me?"

"No, mademoiselle," replied Robert, rather coldly. "I will do what you ask: I even hope that the colonel will consent to comply with your request, and I admit that you are almost sure to succeed in the career you have chosen. But what then! What will your life be? Do you know how actresses live? Do you think they are content with their salaries—when they get any?"

"I shall be content with mine. You must recollect that I was able to live upon a fourth of what Madame de Malvoisine paid me."

"You forget that you were at no expense while you were with her: but if you go upon the stage the toilets that will be required of you will absorb all the money you earn and more. You will say, perhaps, that you will marry. Would you be willing to marry an actor?"

"No."

"Can you hope that any man of the world, no matter how ardently he might admire your talent, would ask your hand in marriage?"

"Still less," replied Violette, sadly.

Her eyes filled with tears, and this touched Robert, who already began to regret his sternness.

"Forgive me, mademoiselle," he said, kindly, "for thus destroying your illusions, but I think them exceedingly

dangerous, and I am too truly your friend to encourage you in them."

Violette wiped her eyes, and lifting her head and looking Robert full in the face, responded firmly:

"I do not blame you in the least, but my mind is fully made up, and I have sufficient confidence in myself to feel sure that I shall be able to avoid the perils you point out to me. It is enough for me that you do not entirely desert me; that is, that you will not refuse me your counsel when I apply to you. I am alone in the world, and I have no one to depend upon but you. I ask you to see my work before you judge me. If you do not consider my conduct irreproachable, if you find me unworthy of your friendship and interest, I will not ask you to trouble yourself any further about me, but until that time comes do not refuse me your friendship and assistance."

"Both are already yours, mademoiselle," replied Robert, quickly, "and as you desire it, I will see Colonel Mornac and ask him to do all in his power to facilitate your entrance upon the career you have chosen, and I do not doubt that he will comply with your request. Where can I inform you of his decision?"

"At No. 47 Rue de Constantinople. You can either write or call on me there to-morrow afternoon, at three o'clock, as best suits your convenience."

"I will call if you have no objections, mademoiselle," he replied, promptly, "and I will perhaps bring the colonel with me."

Then a new idea suddenly occurring to him, he asked, suddenly:

"Has the idea of trying to find your parents never occurred to you?"

"Never! I knew too well that I should not succeed."

"Are you willing that I should try?"

"You, my friend!" exclaimed the young girl. Then suddenly recollecting herself: "Pardon me, sir," she said,

"I do not know that you will permit me to call you by that title."

"Do you still doubt it?" asked Robert, smiling. "Well, to convince you that you have the right, must I call you Violette?"

"I should be very glad if you would."

"That is, until I can call you by your own name—the name that your mother gave you and that you have forgotten."

"Mother! what a sweet word!" murmured the orphan. "And I shall never see her to whom I should be so glad to apply it!"

"Who knows? She is still living probably—you are so young."

"I would rather believe she was dead than think that she abandoned me."

"There is nothing to prove that she did. You may have been stolen from her, and she may still be deploring your loss."

"If I could only believe that—"

"What would you do?"

"I would search for her everywhere. But that is impossible. The mother superior of the convent at Rennes on describing when and where I was found, told me that my story was published in all the newspapers, and that a description of me was sent to all the principal towns of France. If my mother had been living she would have come to claim me, that is unless she lost me intentionally."

"But your father—have you no recollection of him?"

"Only a very vague one. It seems to me that at the time I was being carried about in my nurse's arms that a man often scolded me in a loud voice that frightened me."

"You would recognize the voice, perhaps, if you heard it again."

"I doubt it very much. I can not recall the man's face at all."

"But you would perhaps recognize the house in which you lived if it were shown to you."

"I am afraid not."

"I am inclined to think that you must have lived in Havre. You have spoken of a pier extending out into the sea, and of a large ship coming into port. There is one answering to that description at Havre, where the residents of that city go to see the foreign steamers come into port."

"So I have been told; but I never visited that city. The only towns I know anything about are Rennes and Paris; and my acquaintance with these places is very limited. At the convent we went out but once a week, and then only for a short walk. At Saint Maude we never went farther than the Bois de Vincennes. While I was at Madame de Malvoisine's I did occasionally venture as far as the Park Monceau, and once or twice as far as the garden of the Tuileries."

"But you must have attended the theater with the countess."

"No, I never set foot in a theater in my life."

"And yet you wish to go upon the stage?"

"It is very audacious in me I know; but the untried has its charms. And I am sure that I shall not be troubled with stage fright—for the same reason that a conscript who is ignorant of the danger goes so bravely into battle."

Robert was surprised to hear Violette speak in this way; but it was no time to discourage her.

"Will you go to the Opera or to the Opera Comique with me?" he asked.

"With the greatest pleasure," replied the young girl, gratefully. "To hear 'Don Juan,' the 'Huguenots,' 'Carmen,' all the *chefs d'œuvres* I know by heart, that is one of the dreams of my life!"

"A dream that can be easily realized. But as you seem to trust me, why will you not allow me to escort you to

Havre! I should like to see if you would recognize the jetty, and we could try to find the house with the garden."

"I am not at all confident that I should recognize it; but I will do as you think best, for I do trust you, and feel sure that you would never compel me to remind you of our compact. Now I must leave you, for I want to see Madame Valbert to-day. If I do not explain the situation to her without delay Madame de Malvoisine may succeed in prejudicing her against me, so I am going out to Saint Mandé for the day-time, and shall return in the same way. Good-bye until to-morrow," concluded Violette, rising and offering Robert a hand that he pressed warmly.

"What a strange girl!" Becherel said to himself as he stood watching her until she disappeared from sight. "Heaven only knows how all this will end; but I can not make up my mind to desert her. Her plan of going on the stage is arrant folly, and I shall try to induce her to abandon it. But why shouldn't I try to find her relatives? It would be a worthy and charitable act which I am sure my mother would heartily approve if I consulted her; and I shall consult her as soon as I am able to see my way a little more clearly, for I must first get out of the scrape Gustave has got me into."

While thus soliloquizing, Robert turned mechanically to leave the garden by the same path he had entered, and he was walking slowly along with his head bowed upon his breast when he was suddenly aroused from his reverie by a voice that cried:

"Well, what are you doing here?"

Robert glanced up and perceived Colonel Mornac.

"You came here to meet some fair lady, of course," continued the old soldier. "Oh, I don't blame you. It's only natural in one of your years. Even I—though I'm rather more than twenty-five—came here on a similar errand. My divinity just left me, however."

"So did mine," replied Robert, smiling.

"Then I guessed correctly. Well, I'm not sorry to meet you. Come, let's have a talk."

"Willingly, colonel, for I have a host of things to say to you. In fact I was intending to come and breakfast with you to-morrow morning."

"Good! I shall count upon seeing you punctually at twelve to-morrow. In the meantime come and take a turn in the Champs Elysées with me. How have you been spending your time since night before last?"

"Very badly, colonel."

"What have you been doing? Oh, I know. While I was chatting with the fair widow the other evening I saw you at the card-table. You played and lost, I suppose?"

"If that were all—"

"You certainly can't mean—"

"Monsieur Labitte has found out that I've been gambling and has dismissed me."

"The deuce! this is a nice piece of news for your mother!"

"I've written to her."

"And a fine situation you are in—without employment and without money—for I doubt if you had enough to pay your indebtedness, for they play heavily at the house of our dear countess."

"I borrowed the money."

"Another act of folly. Of whom did you borrow it?"

"Of a usurer that was recommended to me."

"Worse and worse! Why didn't you come to me, you young idiot?"

"I didn't dare. It was a matter of ten thousand francs."

"Zounds! you have certainly begun well! Of course you'll be obliged to mortgage your property to meet the note when it becomes due. You are following in your father's footsteps, my boy; and you'll probably do worse

than he did, for he was fortunate enough to die in time. You'll reduce your mother to want, unquestionably."

"I'll blow my brains out first."

"You'll do that too without a doubt if you keep on. You'd better enlist at once. You had better be a soldier than a loafer."

"I don't intend to remain idle. There is nothing to prevent me from making a good deal of money if I choose."

"In what way, pray?"

"At the Bourse."

"That is to say by speculating. Was it your friend Gustave that put this idea into your head?"

"I don't see why I should conceal the fact that he associated me with him yesterday—without my knowledge—in a little speculation that he considered a sure thing, and that turned out very well, as my share of the profits amounts to about thirty-five thousand francs."

"There's a generous speculator for you! Have you drawn your share of the profits yet?"

"Not yet. In fact I felt some hesitation about doing so, as he speculated for me without my knowledge or consent: and if he had lost I should not have been able to pay my share of the loss, at least not immediately."

"In that case I don't see how you can hesitate. You must leave the money in the broker's hands and tell Mr. Gustave not to make use of your name in any of his swindling operations hereafter."

"Is that really your advice?"

"It certainly is."

"Very well: I shall follow it then: at least I shall draw the money and hand every penny of it over to Gustave."

"Who will immediately try the same game over again. If you do that you are lost, and I shall not trouble myself any more about you. I can take an interest in a young man who rashly squanders his patrimony, but not in a weak and unprincipled man who trifles with his honor.

Listen, my boy. I was your father's friend, and I will be yours upon certain conditions, the first of which is that you will have nothing more to do with this unscrupulous speculator. Let him get out of the scrape as best he can; and if he makes any fuss send him to me. I'll see that he gives you no further trouble."

"I have no desire to see him again," said Becherel.

"So much the better. Now what are your plans for the future?"

"I have made none yet."

"Then you had better return to Rennes and become a provincial swell again. You'll probably capture some heiress eventually. That is the best thing that could happen to you, unquestionably; and as you stand a better chance of success in your native town than in Paris, I would advise you to return there without delay."

"I would like to, but it is impossible."

"And why?"

"Circumstances forbid."

"Explain, if you please."

"Mademoiselle Violette has been dismissed on my account, and is now living alone in the lodgings she has been occupying for some time past at No. 47 Rue de Constantinople."

"And she asks your protection? She certainly has chosen a singular mentor."

"Whether she has acted wisely or not, would you advise me to refuse her my aid?"

"That depends. What does she want of you?"

"She is anxious to go on the stage, and she asks me to aid her by interesting you in her behalf, as you can be of much greater service to her in this matter than I can."

"I always thought she would come to that sooner or later; and I am satisfied that she will be a success, for she has a superb voice and musical talent of the highest order."

"Then you will not refuse to do what you can for her?"

"Why should I? With beauty like hers she is sure to turn out badly, so it had better be as an actress. The profession gives a certain *prestige* to the fall. I am acquainted with the manager of a new theater who is seeking new attractions. I will introduce your protégée to him, and when he has heard her I feel sure that he will engage her on very liberal terms. The consequences of all this are no business of mine."

"She told me her story just now; and since I have heard it I am inclined to think that she will succeed."

"I know her story too, at least in part, but I have kept it to myself. The mistress of the boarding-school at Saint Maule told it to me; but Madame de Malvoisine doesn't know a word of it. This Violette, who is certainly rightly named, by the way, was found on a public promenade in Rennes; but she can not be the offspring of a laborer or mechanic, for she shows blood to her very finger-tips. I have always fancied that her parents were people of wealth who lost her on purpose."

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it."

"Then why don't you try to find these barbarous and probably wealthy parents, as you seem to take such an interest in the girl? It would certainly be an eminently meritorious work, and one that would suit a person of your romantic tastes. Then, too, if you should succeed in restoring her to the bosom of her family, she would not be obliged to go on the stage. Her relatives probably would not receive her with open arms, but there might be a handsome inheritance awaiting her now or in the future."

"I am glad to hear you say this, for I had decided to enter upon this very work immediately."

"Is the girl able to give you any information that would assist you in your researches?"

"She says she has a vague recollection of some seaport town—Havre, perhaps—and also of the face and voice of a

lady, who must have been her mother, and also of a large house with a garden."

"Have you seen her since the evening you spent on the Rue du Rocher?"

"She wrote to me asking me to meet her here to-day at two o'clock. We had a long talk, and she left me only a few moments ago to pay her former employer at Saint Maude a visit, for she fears that Madame de Malvoisine will make an effort to rob her of that lady's esteem and friendship."

"She is right; the countess will do everything in her power to injure her; there's no question about that. But I will see Madame Valbert myself, and tell her what I know about the affair. Now let us sum up our conclusions, for I must be off. In the first place, it is agreed that you are going to renounce Satan and all his works—that is to say, the young man named Gustave and his operations at the Bourse."

"Willingly."

"In the second place, I will attend to paying the usurer from whom you borrowed the money; and I shall do it at once, so you would greatly oblige me by informing him that you intend to take up the note two days from now. Thirdly and lastly, I will immediately interest myself in your fair protégée's behalf, and endeavor to secure her an engagement at the Fantasies Lyriques. I will also assist you in your efforts to discover her missing relatives. I will even accompany you on your voyage of discovery to Havre and elsewhere, if you desire it. I must go now, so good-bye. Don't forget that you are to breakfast with me at twelve to-morrow."

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER his conversation with Colonel Mornac, Robert de Becherel returned home, greatly encouraged.

The philosophical colonel was the very mentor he needed, an indulgent but resolute mentor, who excused his faults, even while he set his face firmly against any deviation from the path of honor.

Considerably reassured, and well-nigh consoled for his recent misfortune, Robert finished the day quite cheerfully by dining at an excellent restaurant, after which he went to hear a popular singer who seemed to him greatly inferior to Violette both in talent and beauty.

His enjoyment was slightly marred by a chance meeting. Galimas was enthroned in an orchestra-chair only a short distance from him, and Robert was not a little surprised to receive an almost obsequious bow, of which he took not the slightest notice, however. He tried to divine the cause of this extraordinary politeness, and finally concluded that Galimas saluted in him the fortunate speculator who had just gained a large sum of money. He even asked himself if Galimas had not had a hand in the matter, and this suspicion only strengthened him in his resolve to have nothing more to do with Gustave, either in a social or business way. The evening ended without any other incident of importance. Galimas left the hall before the close of the performance, and Robert, who remained until the conclusion of it, went quietly home and to bed, where he slept much better than on the preceding night, and woke greatly refreshed, shortly after sunrise the next morning.

The business of the day had been marked out for him in advance; at nine o'clock he was to pay a visit to Marcaudier; at twelve o'clock, he was to breakfast with Colonel

Mornac, and at three o'clock he was to have an interview with Violette on the Rue de Constantinople.

The visit to Marcaudier gave him very little uneasiness, for what money-lender ever objected to receiving the amount of a note before it became due?

"One thousand francs for the use of ten thousand for three days is not bad, even for a scoundrel who loans money at the rate of forty per cent. a year," Robert said to himself, as he walked up the Rue Rodier, more and more astonished that a wealthy capitalist would be willing to stay there, even temporarily, for the neighborhood seemed even more intolerable than on his first visit.

The house of which Cash on Delivery was an inmate was even more dingy and dilapidated in appearance than those around it, and when Becherel reached the door, he again shrank from entering the dark passage leading to the staircase guarded by the repulsive-looking *concierge* known as Mother Rembriche.

Glancing up at the house, he perceived that all the windows were protected by heavy wooden shutters that seemed to be rarely opened, and that needed only iron bars to give the house the appearance of a prison.

Becherel also noticed that this strange dwelling, though it adjoined another house on one side, was separated from the nearest dwelling on the other by a dark and narrow alley that seemed to have no outlet at the further end.

But Becherel had not come here to study the topography of this strange locality, so after a minute's hesitation he boldly entered the house. The portress was not in her lodge, but on reaching the landing above she suddenly confronted him, broom in hand.

"Monsieur Marcaudier is not at home," the old hag exclaimed, in a voice husky with anger; "so clear out, and be quick about it."

"Monsieur Marcaudier is expecting me."

"That's a lie! and I tell you that you sha'n't go up and

play the spy, and listen at doors, as you did the other day. You got the best of me then; but you won't again. No rascally detective will succeed in forcing his way into this house while I'm here."

"You deserve a sound thrashing, but I respect myself too much to administer it. I want to speak to Monsieur Marcaudier. Stand aside!"

"So you can go prowling about the house, listening at doors, as you did before. I'm not such a fool! I've no intention of losing my place through you. My master went out a few minutes ago; but even if he was at home, I wouldn't let you go up, for he has forbidden it."

Robert hesitated. He was strongly tempted to push the old hag aside, and ring at the usurer's door; but she was quite capable of clinging to his clothing and uttering shrieks and yells that would be sure to call in the neighbors. Indeed, there was nothing to prevent her from rushing down into the street to summon assistance, and as he did not care to get into a difficulty with the police or brave the scandal a quarrel in the open air would be sure to create, he concluded that it would be better for him to restrain his anger and beat a retreat.

"Enough, you old fool! I am going," he exclaimed; "but you will hear from me again. I shall write to Monsieur Marcaudier, and tell him how you treat people who call to see him on business in his absence, and we'll see what he says about the scandalous way in which you perform your duties as portress."

"Portress, indeed!" yelled the Rembrioche, who wished to have the more honorable appellation of *concierge* applied to her. "So you want to insult me now, you miserable fop! I'll run you out of the house, I will!"

And she brandished her broom with such a threatening air that Robert, concluding that discretion was the better part of valor, rushed down-stairs four steps at a time.

This ridiculous scene not only irritated Becherel, but con-

fused him; but he had scarcely reached the street when he came to the conclusion that this woman would not have assumed the responsibiilty of thus insulting a visitor who had been previously admitted by Marcaudier himself, and that in refusing him admission she had only obeyed her master's orders.

If this was indeed the case, why had Cash on Delivery resolved to close his doors in the face of the debtor he had received so graciously only two days before? Could it be because he was determined to remain Robert de Becherel's creditor, and because he guessed that Robert had come for the express purpose of notifying him that the note would be paid on the morrow? This conjecture seemed highly improbable, however; that is, unless he had been informed of the large amount of money his young client had cleared by a fortunate speculation at the Bourse. And even if he had been apprised of the fact, what possible interest could he have in preventing the payment of the money?

Robert could not imagine, but in mentally reviewing the particulars of his quarrel with Mother Rembriche, he recollected that she had accused him of being a detective, and this opprobrious epithet seemed to have been bestowed upon him in consequence of his exploration of the dark passage leading to an iron door on the third floor, and if this act had given such grave offense, it must certainly be because the usurer had some special reason for desiring that no visitor should be aware of the existence of the door in question.

Hence, this door must conceal a mystery that Marcaudier did not desire solved, and the explanation he had given of the cries and moans heard there, was only a series of falsehoods. There was no dentist's office, or sick woman on the other side of that door, but some wretched prisoner detained there by force.

Having come to this rather rash conclusion, Becherel's imagination began to indulge in the most extravagant

lights, and to see in Marcaudier one of those villains of mediæval times, who kept some dethroned queen a prisoner in a lonely tower.

From this to the resolve to deliver her was but a step to a person of Robert's temperament, and this step was soon taken.

Indeed, the idea took such possession of his mind that he forgot for the moment his intention of searching for Violette's parents. He had plenty of time before him in which to make his voyage of discovery to Havre, while, on the contrary, the best opportunity to solve the mystery of the Rue Rodier seemed to be the present moment.

To accomplish this, he must find a way to gain an entrance into the fortress in which the victim he hoped to succor was pining, and he now knew, by experience, that he would not succeed in entering it from the Rue Rodier. The Rembriche was there to effectually prevent that.

Before opening the siege, he must know something more about the surroundings of the place, in order to decide upon the best point of attack, so he could hardly spend the rest of the morning to better advantage than in exploring these surroundings; so he softly retraced his steps, and after satisfying himself that the old portress was nowhere in sight, he slipped cautiously into the alley on the north side of the house.

He soon discovered that this alley was obstructed at the further end by a wall, and bordered on the right by the side of a house in which there were no windows or openings of any kind. On the left side, and running parallel with this house which fronted upon the Rue Rodier, was a long building that seemed to be an extension of Marcaudier's house.

Both these tall buildings were as gloomy in aspect as the exterior of a prison. Of whom could he ask information? He saw no one; besides, he did not feel inclined to question the first person he met. He resolved to explore this alley thoroughly, however, and his labor was not lost; for near

the wall that obstructed it, he saw a strange building, almost as high as a tower, and surmounted with a sort of glass cage that had probably served as a photographer's studio: but the artist must have long since abandoned it, for many of the panes of glass were broken, and the roof that covered this aerial conservatory was already in ruins.

Robert, on approaching it, saw that the work of demolishing it had begun. The window-shutters and the door had already been removed. A huge pile of plaster filled the hall, and *débris* of all kinds strewed the alley in front of the house: but for some cause or other the workmen had paused in their work of demolition, thus leaving the dilapidated structure open to any one who wished to enter it.

The staircase was still intact—a winding staircase that led up to the glass top of this donjon—a very fortunate thing for Becherel, who was in search of an observatory that would command a view of the neighboring houses.

The ascent was not particularly easy, for the stairs trembled beneath his tread, and the dust that flew from the walls almost blinded him, but when he reached the top he was amply repaid for his labor, for the tower upon whose summit he was standing was not only considerably taller than the surrounding dwellings, but overlooked a garden, or rather a walled inclosure, for it was entirely destitute of both turf and flowers—which extended back quite a distance to a street that ran parallel with the Rue Rodier.

On his left, and in the immediate vicinity of the tower, this inclosure was separated by a tall and substantial iron fence from another garden—a genuine garden, this—a miniature park adorned with shrubbery and evergreens, through which one could discern a small house that must front upon the same street, a street whose name Robert did not know, however, as he had never explored this part of the city before.

The house did not seem to be occupied, however; for no

smoke emerged from the brick chimneys, but the well-kept turf and walks indicated that the dwelling, even though unoccupied, was not permanently abandoned.

Robert de Becherel, not being in a position to solve the problem, concentrated his attention upon Marcaudier's house, from which he was separated only by the alley.

This house, though so narrow that there was room for only a single front window in each story, was so deep that it encroached considerably upon the smaller garden out of which its roof rose like a sort of promontory. This roof was covered with tiles, and in it were two sliding windows, which were standing open.

Were there any windows in the side of the roof that overlooked the garden? Robert could not see from the place where he was standing, but he was able to satisfy himself upon one point, viz., that the extension of the usurer's house adjoined no other house on the side next to this garden.

It was not impossible, however, that this building and its long extension was divided into two separate dwellings by a party-wall, and that portion of it belonged to the owner of the house and garden; but in that case, the owner, who must be a person of means, would not have rented to a dentist or midwife rooms that could be reached only by passing through his own house and garden, so Marcaudier must have told a falsehood when he declared that the woman who was moaning and weeping on the other side of the iron door was not an inmate of his house and that he knew nothing about her.

But how was his victim to be wrested from him? By denouncing him to the authorities? That would certainly be the easiest way, but would it be the most efficacious? The authorities always act with great prudence, or in other words very slowly, and they would not be likely to issue a search warrant upon the complaint of a young man who was a comparative stranger in Paris, and who could furnish

no proofs to substantiate his accusations against a respectable citizen. Any magistrate or commissioner of police would begin by summoning Marcaudier, and demanding an explanation; and Marcaudier being thus warned, would have time to remove his prisoner to some other place of confinement.

Robert could succeed only by taking the matter into his own hands, and this was what he had resolved to do, though it would be no easy matter for him to gain access to the usurer's captive.

To go to the door of the house he saw at the other end of the garden and ask the permission of its occupants—if it had any—to examine this suspicious building more closely was almost as impracticable as to risk a leap over a space fifteen feet in width and nearly thirty in depth.

It was more than likely that these people would take him for a fool, and laugh in his face, to say nothing of the fact that even if he should be allowed to enter the garden, he would probably be no wiser than he was now, for it was very doubtful if there was any way of gaining an entrance into the Marcaudier house on that side.

Robert was beginning to despair, when he suddenly discerned upon a wall beyond and above the roof of Marcaudier's house the inscription: "Hotel de la Providence" in huge black letters. This sign must be that of a hotel on the Rue Rodier, below Marcaudier's house, and this hotel had side windows which were only five or six feet above the windows in the roof of the extension.

It would only be necessary for Robert to hire one of these desirably located rooms, install himself there, and when evening came, lower himself by a rope to reach this roof, to which there was no way of gaining access from the street. Once upon this roof, he would have no difficulty in reaching one of the windows and letting down a lantern that would enable him to see what was going on in this mysterious garret.

This plan seemed so admirable that he resolved to carry it into execution at the earliest possible moment.

He asked himself once more, and for the last time, however, if he could possibly be mistaken in his conjectures; if this house did indeed serve as a prison for some unfortunate fellow-creature, or if he was about to risk his life for nothing?

The idea of attempting to discover whether this back building was really occupied or not occurred to him, and gathering up a handful of plaster he threw it into the window nearest him.

Twice he failed, and the bits of plaster rolled down the roof into the gutter, but the third attempt proving more successful, Robert hoped that the prisoner, if there was one, would throw the plaster back again, to indicate his presence. He waited with this expectation, but in vain; and finally becoming discouraged, he concluded to leave this tower where there was very little chance of making any further discoveries.

He had scarcely set foot in the alley, however, when something struck him on the shoulder, and bounding off rolled across the alley to the foot of the opposite wall. Of course when Becherel was hit by this object that seemed to have fallen from the skies, his first impulse was to glance upward, and seeing no one at the windows of the tower he had just quitted, he speedily concluded that the projectile must have come from the casement into which he had thrown the plaster a few moments before, for the other house had no windows on the side next the alley.

The desired response had come at last in the form of some round object, about the size of a billiard ball, but not as large and heavy, and wrapped in a scrap of coarse paper. Robert sprung forward to pick it up, and was surprised to find it an apple of inferior size and quality. At first the discovery disconcerted him not a little, but after some reflection, he came to the conclusion that the prisoner, in her

anxiety to give some signs of life to those without, had seized the first thing she could lay her hands upon: but with it she must have sent some word of explanation.

Robert hastily unfolded the scrap of coarse paper in which the apple was enveloped—a scrap of paper which seemed to have been torn from some grocer's day-book, and upon which Robert could at first discern only columns of figures. But on examining it more closely, he perceived some red letters that seemed to have been traced with the point of a pin or a nail.

The next thing to be done was to decipher them, and this proved no easy matter.

Becherel finally succeeded in deciphering the word, "Help!" and several indistinct letters that seemed to compose the last syllable of another word. This syllable was either "one, or onne," but the first syllable had become so blurred that it was impossible to make it out.

The discovery was one of great importance, nevertheless, for the word, "Help" must have been written by the person who had just thrown this strange projectile, so she must be forcibly detained, and very unkindly treated, as she was reduced to writing with her own blood, and to using a pin or a nail as a substitute for a pen.

Moreover, the ending of the illegible word suddenly reminded Robert of the sounds he had heard through the iron door two days before—those plaintive appeals terminating in "onne," and repeated again and again.

Putting the scrap of writing carefully in his pocket, Becherel left the alley, and started up the Rue Rodier without even glancing behind him. He had gone but a few yards, however, when he saw Gustave approaching, and it was impossible to avoid a meeting, for his former comrade had seen him, and was coming straight toward him.

"So much the better!" thought Robert. "This is just as good an opportunity to settle the matter as I shall ever have, probably."

"You have been to see Cash on Delivery, I suppose," cried Gustave.

"Yes, but I did not find him at home."

"That is because you came too late. Marcandier is here only from nine to ten, and it is after eleven now."

"His charming portress told me he had gone out, but he may be at home to you."

"I have no intention of calling on him. I am on my way to a client who resides on the Rue Tradaine, and whom I must see before I go to breakfast. What did you want with our financier?"

"I wanted to notify him that I would be ready to pay the note I gave him to-morrow."

"But the note is not due."

"That makes no difference. I don't want my note to remain in this usurer's hands."

"The deuce! you've become very proud, it seems to me, since your little speculation turned out so well."

"I shall not touch a cent of that money."

"Don't talk nonsense. Yesterday I took the trouble to explain that you could hardly do otherwise, and you promised me you would draw the money."

"I have changed my mind."

"All this is really too absurd. Besides, I really think you might be more considerate than to place me in such an embarrassing position. I want my share, and so does my partner—the gentleman who gave me the information that enabled me to make the money."

"Then you must devise some way of getting it without my help. You certainly shall not touch a cent of mine, however."

Gustave turned pale with anger, but he managed to control himself, though he said, with a sneer:

"You seem to have been seized with another attack of morbid conscientiousness, but you'll get over it."

"I think not," replied Becherel, coldly.

"So you have decided to play me false! You ought to have warned me that you intended to let me get out of the scrape the best way I could."

"On the contrary, it was your duty to have told me that you wanted the use of my name in carrying out your scheme. I should have refused it. But I said all this to you yesterday, and it is useless for me to repeat it. You may rest assured of one thing, however. I shall not touch one cent of the money."

"Very well. Then you have no objections to our acquaintance ending here, I suppose."

"If you desire it."

"Look here, Robert, you certainly would not sever your relations with a friend without some cause. Confess that some one has been prejudicing you against me. It can not be Galimas, for you haven't seen him since the evening you met him at Madame de Malvoisine's."

"I am only obeying the dictates of my own conscience."

"Oh, I know. It was Violette. She never liked me, though I can't imagine why, for I have always treated her with the greatest deference."

"You would greatly oblige me by not dragging Mademoiselle Violette's name into the conversation."

"So you have constituted yourself her champion. I congratulate you; she is certainly a very pretty girl. She's a shrewd one, too, and I would advise you to be on your guard."

"I do not recognize your right to meddle with my affairs, and I forbid you to mention that young lady's name again."

"So that is the way you treat my advice! Ah, well, you had better go your way, and I'll go mine. You have got me into a fine scrape, but I shall get out of it, all the same. Still, you needn't be surprised if I pay you back for this shabby treatment some day."

"Do your worst!" cried Robert, angrily.

And he passed on without any attempt on the part of Gustave to detain him. The rupture was complete, and Becherel was not sorry, for he had seen enough of this rather disreputable acquaintance, and he wished to return to the companionship of honorable men.

Colonel Mornac must be expecting him at that very moment, and as he was anxious to consult him before continuing the investigation so fortunately begun, he resolved to repair to that gentleman's lodgings immediately.

He was admitted by the colonel's valet, who was neatly dressed in black, and he instantly perceived that his own cozy quarters in the Faubourg Poissonnière looked poor and mean in comparison with these luxurious apartments.

The colonel was not only a good deal richer than his protégé, but he had remarkably correct ideas of elegance and comfort, so his rooms were perfection. There was not only plenty of light and space, but each room was admirably suited to the use for which it was intended, nor was there a single blunder in the furnishing, nor a color that did not harmonize in this interior planned by an intelligent man of the world. There were ornaments enough, but not one too many. A few books and pictures, but all admirably chosen—more curiosities picked up on his travels than costly knickknacks bought at auctions at the risk of the purchaser—and M. de Mornac enjoyed and appreciated these spacious and luxurious quarters the more from the fact that he had spent at least twenty-five years of his life in a garrison or in camp.

Robert found him reclining on a sofa in a large dressing-room, which was a model of its kind, and which was lined with long mirrors that concealed wardrobes, each of which had its particular use. There was a wardrobe for dress suits, a wardrobe for morning costumes, a wardrobe for riding and hunting suits, and another for shoes and hats and sundry toilet articles for which there was not room on

the white marble shelves that encircled the huge bath-tub. "Well, colonel, you certainly are very comfortably fixed here!" cried Robert, in astonishment.

"Yes, tolerably," replied Louis de Mornac, laughing. "It is disgraceful, I suppose, for an old soldier to surround himself with so much luxury, but I spent so much of my life in dingy stuffy little rooms, when I was young, that I certainly have a right to indemnify myself for past sufferings. But you mustn't fancy that I am becoming completely spoiled. I ride horseback two hours every day, and when the time comes for leading another charge against the Prussians, you will find that I can wield a saber with the best of them. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be much hope of that just now, so we had better go to breakfast," he added, leading his young guest into a dining-room, which was even more elegant and complete in its appointments than the dressing-room.

"Sit down and help yourself," the host said, cordially. "The oysters are on the table, and there is some excellent sauterne at your elbow. I'll ring for my valet when we want him. What have you been doing since yesterday? Have you seen your usurer?"

"I called on him this morning, but didn't find him at home."

"And how about Mademoiselle Violette?"

"I am to see her this afternoon at three o'clock."

"In short, the situation of your affairs has undergone no change. I have some news for you, however."

Becherel felt almost sure that the communication was in some way connected with Violette, and he was right.

"I have no intention of repeating my lecture of yesterday in regard to a certain young lady and your plans concerning her," continued the colonel. "You are old enough to judge for yourself in such matters; but I promised to assist you in the noble and painful task you have imposed upon yourself. I am a man of my word, so allow

me to say that on leaving you yesterday I went straight to the manager of the Fantasies Lyriques."

"And you spoke to him about Violette?"

"I didn't talk of anything else; and I didn't waste my breath either. I found him in a very amiable mood: in fact he is not only willing but anxious to oblige me in every possible way. You see, I loaned him one hundred thousand francs last year, and he would be put to great inconvenience if I should ask him for the money, for the last theatrical season was a very poor one, and that upon which we are just entering doesn't seem likely to prove much better, so he is not only in great need of money but also of an *artiste* that will restore the prestige he seems to have lost. You will understand, too, that this *artiste* must not only be a marvel of grace and beauty but of talent and intelligence as well, when I tell you that she will have to learn a long and rather difficult rôle in three weeks. Of course I told him that I knew the very person he was looking for, so he consented to grant my paragon a hearing; and in order that there might be no time wasted he sent word to the author and composer of the operetta in question, and to the leader of the orchestra, that they must come to the theater this morning to decide upon the merits of the would-be star."

"Good heavens! and Violette knows nothing of all this!"

"What do you take me for? I informed her yesterday. You told me her address, you recollect, so I wrote to her before I left Cochard's office, and at this very moment your protégée is probably showing them what she can do; and if the verdict proves favorable she will be engaged immediately and on very favorable terms."

"Is it possible? It seems to me that I must be dreaming! How delighted the poor girl must be. And it is to you that she owes this brilliant future!"

"Don't boast too soon. It is by no means certain that she will please her judges; and even if she succeeds in that the public remains to be conquered, remember."

"She will succeed in that, I am sure."

"I'm strongly inclined to think so myself; but there is one danger, and a very serious one, it seems to me. If she succeeds don't you think you are likely to be jealous?"

"What! jealous?"

"Yes. You love Violette now, and you are sure to love her still more fondly, for she is well worthy of your love, and like all young men in your condition you are sure to be in your seat close to the foot-lights every evening before the curtain rises. I can see you now in the first row of orchestra chairs gazing fondly at your divinity and rapturously swallowing every note that she utters."

"I shall try not to appear too ridiculous," said Robert, gayly.

"I presume so; but it will not do for Violette to have eyes for nobody but you. An actress belongs to the public and must divide her smiles equally among her listeners. How do you think you will feel when you see her casting sweet glances at some odious person such as Galimas, for example? He will be on hand, you may rest assured. He never misses a first night, I can tell you."

Robert colored and seemed unable to find any reply.

"Madame de Malvoisine, too, will be there," continued the colonel, "and her ward as well, and they will not come to applaud the *débutante*, I can tell you. What will you do if they venture to sneer or even to laugh at her? Will you publicly constitute yourself Violette's protector against her enemies, as well as against all admirers who are distasteful to you?"

"Really, colonel, one would suppose that you were resolved to discourage me—you who have just opened a theatrical career to this young girl, and who seemed to approve her determination to earn a livelihood in this way. Why should you disapprove to-day what you approved yesterday?"

"I disapprove no more than I approve. You don't

understand me, my dear boy. I simply wish to warn you of the inevitable consequences of Mademoiselle Violette's entrance upon a theatrical career, and to show you that neither of you can long remain blind to the fact that your situation with reference to each other must be clearly defined. You are both deluding yourselves with some absurd nonsense about friendship and platonic love; and you cherish a vague hope of marrying her by and by after she finds her relatives: but I have convinced you, I hope, that this hope and the young lady's adoption of a theatrical career are irreconcilable. The die is cast, as she has probably been engaged by Cochard by this time; and it is all for the best, perhaps, as she certainly has a decided talent for this calling, and a *prima-donna* can easily dispense with ancestors and husband. What does it matter whether she has a name and relatives or not, provided she sings well?"

"So your conclusion, colonel?"

"My conclusion is that the trip to Havre, which I advocated so strongly at first, has become entirely useless; besides, Violette would not have time to take it with us. On and after to-morrow she will find herself obliged to be in constant attendance upon rehearsals, and without a minute she can call her own."

"I might go down to Havre alone."

"What good would it do? You could not find the house in which her childhood was spent without her assistance. Besides, there is nothing to prove that this house was in Havre any more than in any other seaport town, so I advise you to abandon the scheme altogether. Now let us speak of another matter. You just told me that you did not find the usurer at home. That being the case, you had better write to him at once, for you must not remain under pecuniary obligations to such a scoundrel. Before you go, too, you must take the money to pay the note."

"As you please, colonel; but I would much rather leave

it with you until I am sure that Marcaudier is ready to receive it."

"Why don't you frankly admit that you are afraid of losing it, as you lost Monsieur Labitte's ten thousand francs the other evening. I think all the better of you for your prudence. I hope you have kept your word, and not touched the money made at the Bourse."

"I just met Gustave and told him that I would abandon my share of the profits to him. We had quite a stormy conversation on the subject, and the interview ended in a complete rupture."

"I congratulate you; and now we have settled all the questions of the day we can breakfast in peace. It won't take us long, as I've nothing but the classical *omelette aux rognons* and the traditional cutlet to offer you."

"That is enough and more than enough, colonel."

"Then you haven't the royal appetite of your father, who was one of the heartiest eaters in Brittany—and what a drinker he was! Ah! the young men of the present day are not to be compared with the men of my generation!"

The breakfast ended without any other incident of importance. Robert, who was overjoyed at Violette's probable triumph had very little to say, but the colonel's animated descriptions of Parisian life and of the ladies of his acquaintance amused his young guest immensely.

Nearly two hours had been spent in relating his achievements in love and war, for M. de Mornac, after lauding the charms of his divinities of days gone by, began to relate his campaigns in Africa and in the Army of the Rhine, when the valet entered to announce the arrival of a visitor; and Robert, who had not forgotten that Violette was expecting a call from him, promptly availed himself of this opportunity to take leave.

"Good-bye, my boy," said the colonel, pressing his young guest's hand affectionately; "go, but don't let it be long before you come again. I know you now as well as if

I were your own father, and can see that your good qualities more than atone for your faults, though they are not trifling ones by any means. But you will be cured of them; and if you will listen to me and follow my advice, I feel sure that I shall succeed in making a man of you."

So Robert left the house very proud of M. de Morna's confidence in him, but only partially reassured in regard to the probable consequences of his compact with Violette. He perceived all the disadvantages of it—the colonel had just pointed them out to him—and yet he did not even think of breaking his promise, for he felt that he loved the orphan too much to desert her.

He regretted, too, that he had not previously enlisted his mother's sympathies in Violette's behalf, for Mme. de Becherel, who might then have approved her son's generous scheme, would now certainly refuse him in constituting himself the protector of an actress, no matter how worthy of interest Marie Thabor, the infant prodigy she had seen and heard at the convent at Rennes, might be.

These thoughts engrossed his mind so completely that as he was walking up the Rue de la Pepinière on his way to the Rue de Constantinople, he turned into the Rue du Rocher without even being aware of the fact; nor did he become conscious of this blunder on his part until he reached the house occupied by the Countess de Malvoisine.

A victoria was standing at the door, and Mme. de Malvoisine and Herminia were at that very moment descending the steps with the evident intention of entering it.

Becherel hoped to escape their notice, but they had excellent eyesight, and it was very evident to him that they had seen him.

"I am certainly very unlucky," he muttered, quickening his pace. "They must have guessed that I am on my way to see Violette, and they will not hesitate to proclaim the fact to their friends, who will be sure to make all sorts of ill-natured comments. It doesn't matter much, however.

I am prepared for almost anything on the part of these creatures."

He did not turn to see them enter their carriage, but hastened on to the intersection of the Rue du Rocher and the Rue de Constantinople. Violette admitted him herself, and by her beaming face it was very easy to see that she had good news to announce to him.

Ushering him into a little parlor which was very simply furnished but full of flowers, she said, joyfully:

"You will hardly believe what I am going to tell you, I am sure. I am engaged, and on the most liberal terms! It seems to me that I must be dreaming. I am to have five hundred francs a month to begin with, and the management is to furnish my costumes."

"Then the verdict was favorable?"

"How did you hear anything about it?"

"I just breakfasted with Monsieur de Mornac."

"The colonel! Ah! how can I ever prove my gratitude? But it is you I should thank, for had it not been for you he would not have recommended me to this manager."

Robert shared his protégée's joy, but he manifested less enthusiasm. The colonel's remarks upon the disadvantages of a theatrical career recurred to his mind, and he was a little surprised that Violette perceived only the sunny side of the new life that was opening before her.

"Yes," she continued, "they all congratulated me—the author, the composer, the leader of the orchestra, and the manager—I think *he* even embraced me. They tell me that I will play the part as no other person in Paris could play it, and that the very first performance will insure me the reputation of a star. And to tell you the truth, I was not so very much surprised, for I was really in splendid voice this morning. But how frightened I was when I found myself all alone upon the stage with four or five critics who did not seem to be very favorably disposed toward me. Fortunately I have more self-control than I thought, for I

managed to conquer my terror, and by the time I had sung my third piece it seemed to me that I had done nothing else all my life."

"Which shows that you are a born *artiste*," replied Becherel. "You have certainly done well to follow your vocation."

"Are you really sincere in what you say?"

"Why do you doubt it?"

"Because you don't really seem to mean what you say. Do you blame me for accepting this offer?"

"I have not the right."

"You have the right, sir, for you are my best, in fact, my only friend; and if I had thought that I was displeasing you by presenting myself before this manager, I should certainly have remained at home."

"Then you would have done very wrong," replied Robert, quickly, for he saw that there were tears in his companion's eyes. "I am proud of your triumph, I assure you; and if I appear less delighted than I should, it is because I had dreamed of a different future for you—one that was less brilliant, perhaps, but filled with more lasting happiness."

"Yes, I know. You dreamed of restoring to me all I had lost—a name, relatives—perhaps a mother. But that was only a dream, alas! You would not succeed, and I should do very wrong to allow you to waste your time in such a hopeless undertaking. If I were able to give you any clew it would be very different; and yet I must admit that after I left you yesterday my recollection seemed to suddenly become clear upon one point, but only one. I know now the name by which I was called in my childhood, and which I thought I had entirely forgotten. And this awakening of memory was due to the merest chance," continued Violette. "As I was crossing the garden of the Tuileries, after leaving you, I encountered a party of children who were playing at Puss in the Corner

under the trees. I love children, so I paused a moment to watch them. There was one who never succeeded in getting to a tree, and the others were continually calling her names to tease her."

"Well?" asked Robert, impatient to hear the rest.

"Ah, well! this name was the very name by which my mother used to call me. How had I happened to forget it, and why did it so suddenly recur to my mind! Doubtless, because no one had ever uttered it in my hearing since my infancy, for it is an old-fashioned name, and very few persons bear it nowadays."

"And this name is?"

"Simone. It is neither pretty nor musical, and—"

"Simone," repeated Becherel, greatly surprised, for it must have been this same name that he had heard while listening at the iron-barred door to the despairing appeals of Marcaudier's victim.

The mournful sound of the last syllable still rang in his ears, and he was surprised now that he had not guessed the beginning of the word. It was, doubtless, too, this same word that he had just seen on the paper wrapped around the apple thrown from the attic.

For an instant he was strongly tempted to draw this scrap of paper from his pocket and show it to Violette, but this similarity of names might be a mere coincidence; hence it would not be advisable to allude to it until the mystery of the Rue du Rodier had been cleared up, and as Violette could be of no assistance to him in that task, it was much better that she should remain ignorant of his intentions.

"What is the matter?" inquired Violette, who noticed her companion's evident perturbation.

"Nothing," stammered Robert. "It only seemed to me that I had heard the name before."

"You have seen it in Alfred de Musset's works, probably. One of the prettiest poems he ever wrote is entitled

'Simone.' You are surprised that I have read Musset's works, perhaps? Madame Valbert had them in her library, and I devoured them, though it was very wrong, I know. But I expiated that crime, and all the others I ever committed yesterday at Saint Maude. I told you, I think, that I intended to go and see Madame Valbert after leaving you. Well, she received me very coolly, and when I tried to explain why I left Madame de Malvoisine, she mocked me by declaring that she knew all; that I had done very wrong, and that she should never take any further interest in me. The countess had been there before me. Though what she could have said against me I can not imagine."

"Some atrocious falsehood, of course. You might have expected it. Fortunately, you have no need of this Valbert woman's patronage now."

"No; but I was very much attached to her, and it grieves me to lose her esteem. I returned home almost heart-broken, and nearly cried my eyes out; but fortunately Monsieur de Mornac's letter came to console me."

"And you have fully determined to adopt the stage as a profession?"

"Why should I abandon the idea? The mischief is done now. I have no friends left now."

"You have at least one."

"You? Yes, I know it. I hope, too, that Monsieur de Mornac will not desert me. Besides, I have the approval of my own conscience. I questioned that, after the rebuff I just told you about, and found that I had no cause to reproach myself. If I had a mother I could tell her every act of my life, and lay my inmost heart bare before her without a blush."

"A mother!" repeated Becherel, strangely moved. "Have you renounced all hope of seeing yours again?"

"Alas! yes. The Christian name I have succeeded in

recalling is too slight a clew for me to feel any hope of finding the mother whom I have lost, and whom I should have loved so tenderly. It would be a miracle if I did."

"But if this miracle should come to pass?"

"If my mother were restored to me, I should henceforth live only for her."

"You may rest assured that I shall do all in my power to discover the secret of your birth. I can not say any more now. I must even beg you not to question me on the subject. Forget that I entertain any hope of success, and think only of your *début*. When are you to see the manager of the Fantasies Lyriques again?"

"To-morrow morning. I have my part, and I am to learn the words to-night, and repeat them to-morrow. The other performers know theirs already, and Monsieur Cochard intends that the first performance shall take place in about three weeks."

"I shall be here at a quarter of five, mademoiselle."

"Call me Violette."

"No, Simone—on condition that you will call me Robert."

"Simone? yes; that is my name. I am sure of it now. But I shall remain Violette to everybody except you. Now go, my friend; I must study my part."

Robert took the hand the young girl extended to him. She did not withdraw it when he imprinted a kiss upon it, and he went away firmly resolved to wage a relentless war upon Violette's enemies, and to solve the mystery of the Rue du Rodier at any cost.